DANIEL DAY-LEWIS: THE INTERVIEW

# EMPIRE

NOVEMBER 2025

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ALL THE NUTS AND BOLTS

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*"If you Bugonia, do you getonia free?"*

Marco Vittur. Newsstand cover: Sophy Holland/Universal

# EMPIRE
# WELCOME

I BELIEVE IT was Dorothy Parker who once wrote, "If you can put flying monkeys on your magazine cover, put flying monkeys on your magazine cover." With the second and final part of *Wicked* en route, we've gone full Munchkinland, with an epic cover story by Helen O'Hara featuring the world's first cast interviews (Cynthia Erivo! Ariana Grande! Jeff Goldblum! Michelle Yeoh! Sadly the talking goat proved unavailable) and unseen images from the witch-versus-witch spectacular. Last year the first film hit the world like a Kansas tornado, triumphing at the box office, unleashing tie-in products from body wash (notes of raspberry and bubbles, anyone?) to cupcakes (pink and green batter, naturally), and even giving Greenwich a temporary rebrand to GreenWitch. How on earth can they top that? Turn to page 46 to get a taste.

We have, of course, been holding space for a lot more. Awards season is brewing like a cyclone that dispenses golden statuettes, and this issue is stuffed with interviews with prospective players. We speak to Kathryn Bigelow about her first film in eight years, the almost unbearably tense nuclear thriller *A House Of Dynamite*. Guillermo del Toro tells us why *Frankenstein* is the film he's waited decades to jolt into life. And Edward Berger, whose *Conclave* dominated last year's Oscars, reveals why he's following up his holy-men drama with a very unholy man indeed, via gambling thriller *Ballad Of A Small Player*.

I should probably also mention Daniel Day-Lewis. Yes, THE Daniel Day-Lewis. The triple-Oscar-winner now making his return

to acting in *Anemone*, directed by his son Ronan. Alex Godfrey flew to New York to talk to them both, and it's a truly fascinating conversation. What's more, *Anemone* will be *Empire*'s special screening at this year's London Film Festival, on October 14, with cast and filmmakers in attendance.

Daniel Day-Lewis and flying monkeys. Talk about a broad church.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

**NICK DE SEMLYEN**
**EDITOR**
@nickdesemlyen

## SUBSCRIBER COVER

**This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Thomas Walker**

Thomas specialises in collectors' edition Blu-ray artwork, book covers and collectible movie posters. Go to tommypocket.com to see more of his incredible work.

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## DISPATCHES

### TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

**ALEX GODFREY MET DANIEL AND RONAN DAY-LEWIS**

"When Daniel Day-Lewis emerges from seclusion and asks you to meet him in New York, you get on a damn plane. Expecting a somewhat imposing presence, what I got was a gentle soul opening up alongside his extremely talented director son. Wish I'd worn heels, though."

**JOANNA MORAN PRODUCED OUR JOSH BROLIN SHOOT**

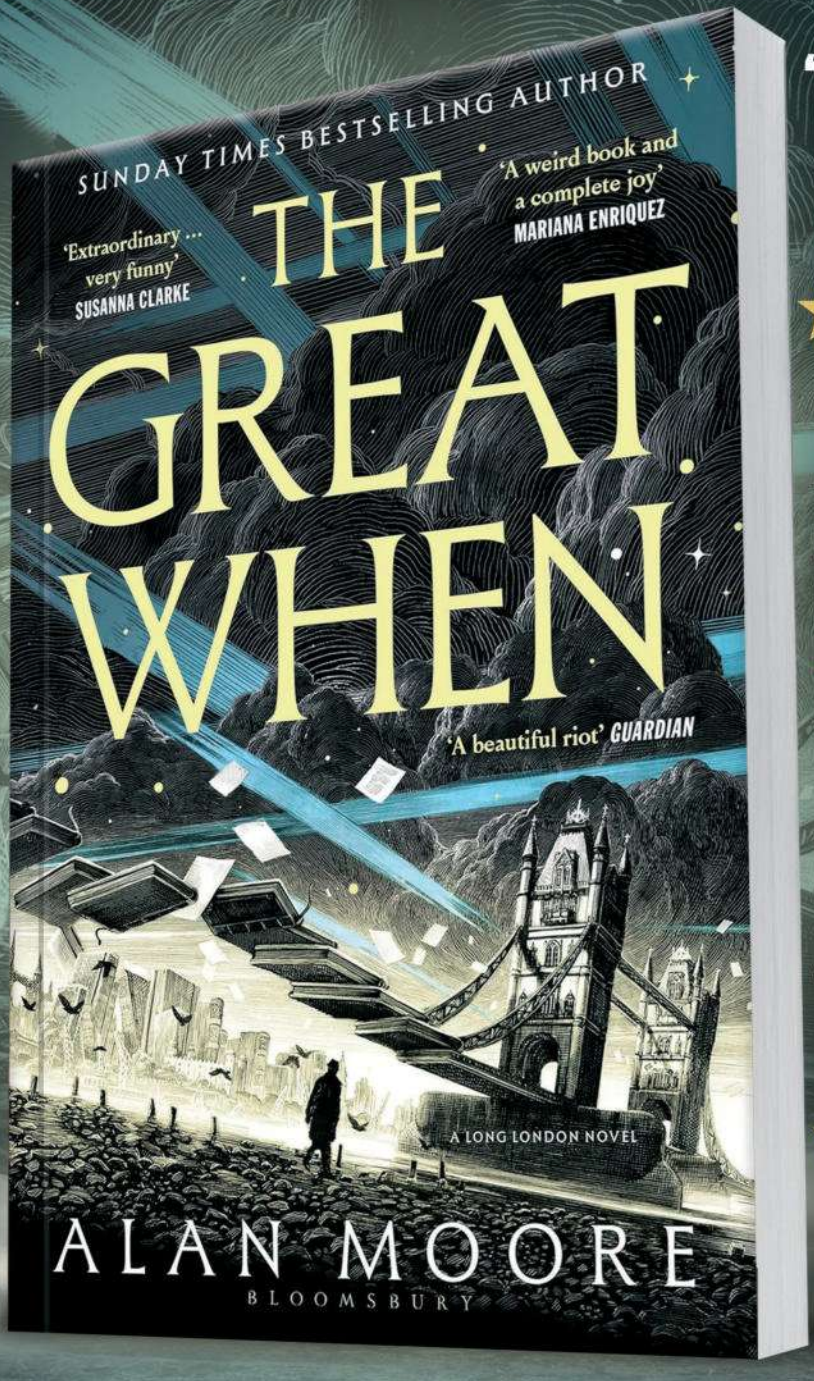
"Had Josh Brolin not made it in Hollywood, he could always have been a cat-charmer: I watched on set as he skilfully wielded a hand-mirror to create a flare off the studio lights. Turn to page 80 to see our amazing shoot with Josh and photographer Arsenii Vaselenko."

**TOM ELLEN VISITED THE SET OF *PREDATOR: BADLANDS***

"I headed to New Zealand last summer to see what was cooking in the *Predator* universe. I even got to play about with the dreadlocked alien's new weaponry. Why I chose to pull that face is anyone's guess. But it was my decision, and I stand by it."


Nicola Dove/© 2025 20th Century Studios. All Rights Reserved. Spinelines Issue 445: Newsstand: "Run. Run, man! Move your ass, man!" is from *Stand By Me*. Subs: "I ran so far and so fast that pretty soon I was all by myself, which was a bad thing" is from *Forrest Gump*

# ENTER A WORLD OF METAFICTIONAL CHAOS




**'A MONUMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT'**

★★★★★

**'ENTRANCING'**

★★★★★

**'ABSOLUTELY WILD'**

★★★★★

**'STUFFED FULL OF SENSAWUNDA'**

★★★★★

**'MOORE'S STORYTELLING IS UNPARALLELED'**

★★★★★

**'TRULY FANTASTICAL'**

★★★★★

*SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ALAN MOORE

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# COMMENT

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

### THAT'S GOLD, JERRY!

Your 'top ten films of 1995 feature' ['The Ranking', issue #443] and Jerry from *Die Hard With A Vengeance* got me thinking about how movies are such a great way of learning facts. Indeed, it was Jerry who taught me who the 21st US President was. I also know it was John Lennon who said, "If I'd lived in Roman times, I'd have lived in Rome," thanks to Nicolas Cage in *The Family Man*. What is the most interesting thing you've learned from a movie?

**MATT TUCK, SOUTHAMPTON**

*We learned from* Ghostbusters *never to cross the streams. Intel that comes in especially useful in a men's urinal. To facilitate your incurable cinematic curiosity, Matt, have a Picturehouse membership. And if any other readers want to share fun facts they learned from the movies, let us know...*

Picturehouse

*Empire*'s star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks.

**ON *THE CONJURING: LAST RITES***

I remember when *Friday The 13th* 'ended' with *The Final Chapter* and *Indiana Jones* with *The Last Crusade*. Having "final" and "last" in the title means absolutely nothing. It never has.

**MATTHEW HAWKINS**

### HUNGRY HEARTS

Beth Webb points out Springsteen-biopic stars Stephen Graham and Jeremy Allen White have both starred in one-take kitchen dramas ['On Our Minds', issue #444]. It goes deeper: a one-take short from 1987 features a brooding protagonist in a kitchen — the music video for 'Brilliant Disguise' by Bruce Springsteen!

**SCOTT MCLENNAN, PARADISE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

*The Boss is dynamite in the kitchen, so we hear.*

**ON JACKSON LAMB'S *SLOW HORSES* FART**

'The Spy Who Guffed Me'?

**@PNAPLETON.BSKY.SOCIAL**

### TRAILER TRASH

I'd love to know your thoughts on fan-made fake movie trailers posted on YouTube. In today's AI age, these trailers have fooled me on more than one occasion. It's so frustrating to not only realise you've been had, but sometimes also that the fake trailer looks better than the actual film!

**CHRISTIAN BALHAM, LONDON**

*Read our story on this strange phenomenon — in which we spoke to a fake-trailer creator — in the April 2024 issue of* Empire *(#425).*

## THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT IS YOUR SHOT-IN-THE-DARK, EARLY BEST GUESS FOR THE OSCARS SWEEP NEXT YEAR?

*Ballad Of Wallis Island* [above] for Best Picture and Original Screenplay. I can only hope.

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*Jay Kelly*. Hollywood loves Hollywood stories.

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*Warfare* in the Director and tech categories, with a fight among cast members for Supporting Actor.

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Definitely think the sweep's going to go to *Hamnet*, with it winning at least Best Actor, Director and Adapted Screenplay.

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Michael B. Jordan for *Sinners*. Best Actor AND Best Supporting Actor.

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WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

## PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

### DANIEL DAY-LEWIS COVER DECEMBER 1992

Daniel Day-Lewis, whom we catch up with on page 60, was one of *Empire*'s earliest cover stars. Back in 1992, we reported on the Method actor's methods while making Michael Mann's historical epic *The Last Of The Mohicans:* Day-Lewis spent a month training in survival techniques, "agilely handling tomahawks", we revealed.

Day-Lewis and Mann also went out on jaunts together into the Alabama forest, living like 18th-century woodsmen. Naturally, Day-Lewis "wore a loincloth and moccasins for most of his training", and even took his 18th-century rifle out on his morning jogs. "When he went to the bathroom he'd have that gun with him," said co-star Madeleine Stowe. "He's not of this world, Daniel."

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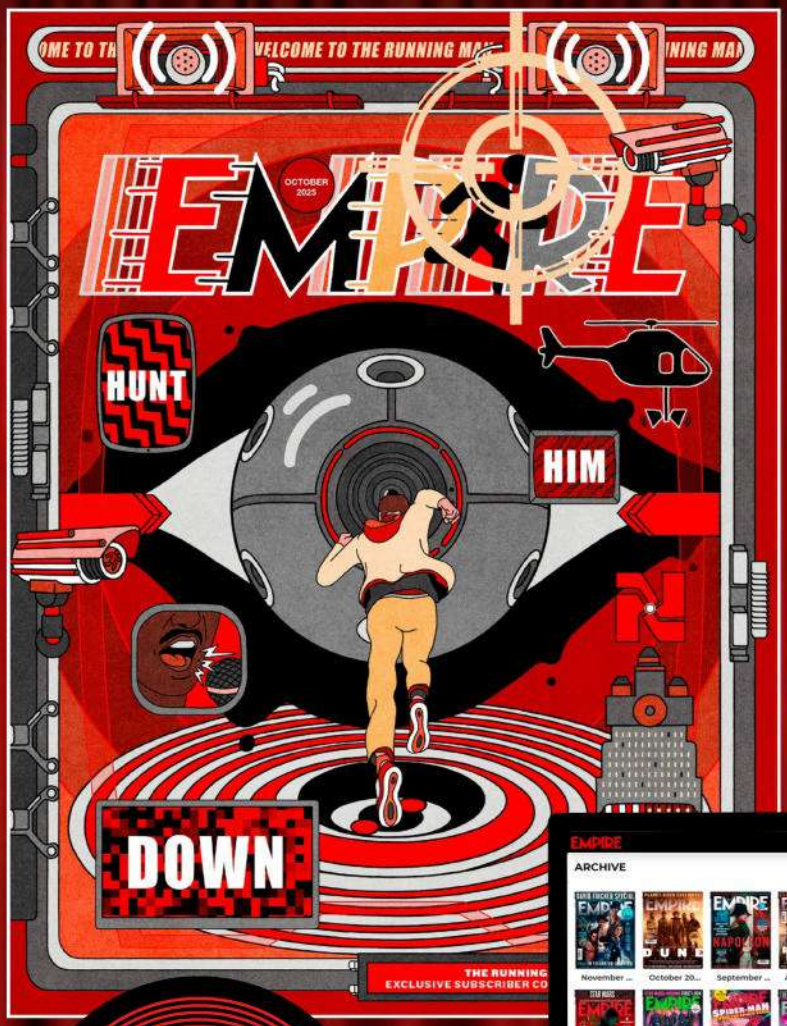


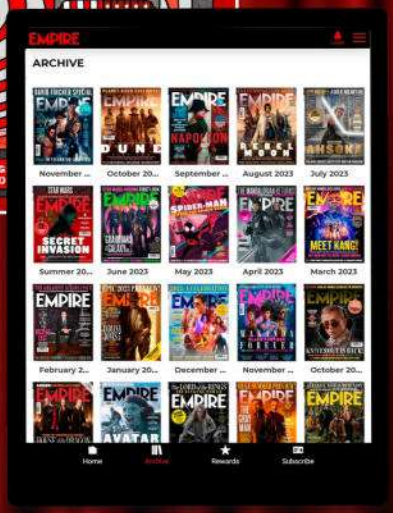


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# first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

NOVEMBER 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

# Kathryn Bigelow's rallying cry

## HOW POLITICAL THRILLER A HOUSE OF DYNAMITE BROUGHT THE DIRECTOR BACK TO FILMMAKING

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

KATHRYN BIGELOW IS thinking about the end of the world. When *Empire* asks the Oscar-winner what compelled her to make *A House Of Dynamite*, her first movie in nearly a decade, she describes the urgency of the nuclear question bringing her back behind the camera. "There's no guard rails on the potential for a catastrophic nuclear reaction," she explains. "I wanted an opportunity to begin a dialogue about it. It's almost been normalised." She sighs in disbelief. "No! That's the end of civilisation!"

Working from an original script by Noah Oppenheim (the former president of NBC News), *A House Of Dynamite* imagines a nerve-shredding scenario in which an intercontinental nuclear missile is fired at the United States. It's not clear who fired it, but the machinery of the state immediately sets in motion, from the military personnel tasked with intercepting the missile (including Anthony Ramos' Major Daniel Gonzalez) to the experts coordinating the response (Rebecca Ferguson's Captain Olivia Walker, running the White House Situation Room) to the commander-in-chief himself making unthinkable decisions (Idris Elba's President, in a markedly different role to the Prime Minister he recently played in *Heads Of State*).

It has been eight years since Bigelow's last film, the 1960s-set *Detroit*; it took nothing less than potential global annihilation for her to get back to work. "Finding material that you're passionate enough about — that's my difficulty," she says. "I really believe in film as a system for information as well as entertainment. But finding material that is illuminating and has the kind of gravitas that *A House Of Dynamite* has is a little bit tricky." The actual production, from start to finish, was relatively quick, she says — "a little over two years".

The filmmakers took a "journalistic approach", collaborating with current and former military officials as part of their research; the script follows real procedures for what happens if the United States is threatened by a nuclear strike. "Most of what we found was in open source," Bigelow says. "It's all available out there. But the fact that the possibility exists, I find shocking."

While the events of the film are fictional and speculative, Bigelow sees it as the third in a kind of loose trilogy of her films — alongside *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* — spun from intense curiosity about America's military-industrial complex. Each of these films, she says, begins with a gnawing question. "With *The Hurt Locker* I was really interested in understanding the methodology of the [Iraqi] insurgency," she explains. "And how an EOD tech, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal tech, would go about disarming those bombs. With *Zero Dark Thirty*, the question was: why did

Getty Images

**Top to bottom:** Ground force: Major Daniel Gonzalez (Anthony Ramos); Captain Olivia Walker (Rebecca Ferguson); Fighter pilots take flight. **Far left:** Director Kathryn Bigelow.

the hunt for Osama bin Laden take ten years? And in this case, it's the nuclear umbrella. How vulnerable are we really?"

As is always the case with Bigelow, this is meaty, cerebral material — but the director never lost sight of the characters driving it. "I found it really critical that the humanity of their stories be predominant," she says. "Y'know, it's humanity that's at stake. That's what the film is basically saying."

Amid this grand canvas, Bigelow peppers personal character details into the film — an uncomfortable argument that Ramos' character has with his girlfriend, a dinosaur toy belonging to the child of Ferguson's character. ("Which also signifies extinction," Bigelow notes with a wry smile.) And while the script is full of military jargon and complex acronyms — press notes for the film include an extensive glossary — Bigelow was keen to find actors who could find deep humanity alongside the dense dialogue. "I've wanted to work with Idris for a long time," she says. "In fact, I met with him on *Zero Dark Thirty*, but the schedules couldn't align. And with Rebecca, they are two of the strongest actors working in the business today. The degree of authenticity that they bring to the characters is unquantifiable."

Bigelow's hope is that this begins a terrifyingly necessary conversation, perhaps even becoming a rallying cry. "My dream scenario would be a reduction of the nuclear stockpile," she says. "That would be a sane response to what we've created. I don't understand how annihilation is a defence measure, and that's my biggest conundrum. 'Oh, good, I'm very well defended, but we're all dead.' No, that doesn't work!" For all our sakes, let's hope someone listens.

***A HOUSE OF DYNAMITE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 3 AND ON NETFLIX FROM OCTOBER 24**

# Notes on a scandal

## AYO EDEBIRI AND ANDREW GARFIELD ON THEIR PROVOCATIVE NEW DRAMA AFTER THE HUNT

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

In Luca Guadagnino's *After The Hunt*, Andrew Garfield and Ayo Edebiri are at serious odds. He plays Hank, a Yale philosophy professor and colleague of Julia Roberts' Alma. When Edebiri's younger PhD student Maggie accuses Hank of sexual assault, they become locked in a bruising psychological battle of accountability and ethics. Thankfully, when *Empire* meets the pair on a sunny terrace the day after the film's premiere at the Venice Film Festival, they're on friendly form. Edebiri even tries out her best English accent, to Garfield's delight. ("It's the ghost of Margaret Thatcher!" Edebiri claims.) They tell us about their unique collaboration.

**Did the two of you know each other before making this film?**
**Andrew Garfield:** Yeah! Not very well. We met at the Emmys. We were at the same table. I felt a real instinct, starting this film, like: I know this girl. I know her as an artist. I know her as a soul. She made me feel safe, very quickly.

**Did you feel the same way, Ayo?**
**Ayo Edebiri:** Noooooo! Not at *all*. (*Laughs*) No, of course. I always appreciate someone who has a really strong sense of humour, and I felt that with Andrew almost instantly. That's my brother! That's my boy. We had friends in common, but it was crazy that this was the thing that we crossed paths on professionally.

**Did you all have a chance to get to know each other better before filming? Was there a rehearsal period?**
**Garfield:** Julia created it with Luca. She was like, "I want everyone to come to my house in San Francisco." And at first I thought, "Why?" I'm very bad with jet lag. I usually go through a mini psychosis for ten days. Truly. So I'm like, "Fuck Julia Roberts! What the fuck is this bullshit?" (*Laughs*) And then, thankfully, against my better judgement, I went — and it was the defining experience of the whole film. Honestly, it was one of the great weeks of my life. It was just heavenly, to be able to bunk up with everybody. I will always trust her instinct. Jet lag be damned!
**Edebiri:** She's so naturally generous and

**Clockwise from top left:** Andrew Garfield as Hank; Behind the scenes with director Luca Guadagnino; Julia Roberts as Alma; Ayo Edebiri plays PhD student Maggie.

nurturing. I think we all had some tough days and tough scenes, and you never felt unsafe. There was always space for each other.

**Did she cook for you?**
**Garfield:** Yeah, she cooked. She made whatever we wanted at any given moment. She made banana bread.

**This film generates some interesting conversations about gender and generations. Did that resonate when you were reading the script?**
**Edebiri:** That's what attracted me to this. I have talked about this a lot with my female friends. The reality is all so murky, and it's important for us to get into the murk sometimes, to get into the dark, sticky, uncomfortable parts. Even after I read the script and had a conversation with Luca, I was like, "I am really enjoying the challenge that this is causing me to have with myself — with my lived experiences and my preconceived notions." That was exciting to me.
**Garfield:** It's so interesting, listening to you talk about it. It makes me think about the power that we all have, the limits of it, where our power is in relation to others, and then owning the responsibility for that. (*Pause*) Fuck. It's literally a fucking Spider-Man quote. Fuck! (*Both laugh*)

**What's been your favourite of each other's work?**
**Edebiri:** Me, I'm a *Silence* fan. I'm a *Silence stan*.
**Garfield:** The first thing I saw Ayo in was *Bottoms*. And it [was] through my dad. My dad loves great films. He's very discerning. For the most part. He also loves Steven Seagal movies.
**Edebiri:** Well, I've been called the Steven Seagal of my generation.
**Garfield:** (*Laughs*) Putin's favourite actress.
**Edebiri:** Putin loves *Bottoms*.

***AFTER THE HUNT*** **IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 17**

Marco Vittur

**THE PLATFORM**

# "I want to see print journalism romanticised again"

**BETH WEBB ON WHY THE BYLINE SHOULD BE BROUGHT BACK TO SCREENS**

OF ALL THE problems that Clark Kent faces in *Superman*, the state of print media isn't one of them. While the world at large burns, *Daily Planet* HQ remains a vibrant sanctuary fuelled by the bashing of keyboards, phones ringing off the hook, and inky-fresh newspapers strewn everywhere. There's even a jovial dig thrown in about the use of adverbs, for goodness' sake!

Outside of the DCU, however, the shaky realities of old-school journalism are making their way into storytelling. In *The Devil Wears Prada 2*, Meryl Streep's Anna Wintour-esque editor-in-chief must reportedly now navigate the decline of traditional magazine publishing. In order to save her beloved 'Runway', she will face her former assistant Emily (Emily Blunt) in a bid to score vital advertising money from the luxury group that Emily now heads. Meanwhile, on the small screen, *The Office* (US) spin-off *The Paper* sees Domhnall Gleeson's seasoned editor-in-chief Ned (pictured above) join a flailing local newspaper in the hopes of shepherding it away from clickbait and back to the glory days of investigative journalism.

I feel that I should pause here and reassure readers that, now in its 36th year, *Empire* remains alive and kicking. But it is an undeniably challenging time for this industry. While recently watching a meet-cute happen in front of a wide magazine stand in Cameron Crowe's *Singles*, I couldn't help but feel a bit sad that today, most of those publications are no longer in circulation.

In the movies, magazines used to be aspirational. In *Almost Famous*, *Rolling Stone* is the epitome of cool. When its fictional band Stillwater discovers that they've made the front cover, a shared chorus of Dr. Hook & The Medicine Show's ode to the publication breaks out ("We take all kinda pills that give us all kinda thrills/But the thrill we've never known is the thrill that'll get ya/When you get your picture on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*"). In *13 Going On 30*, teenager Jenna Rink is elated to discover that, upon being transplanted into her future adult life, she's landed her dream job as an editor at her favourite fashion magazine, 'Poise'.

It's only natural for films and shows to hold a mirror up to what we're experiencing out in the real world, but I want to see print journalism romanticised on screen again. Not just in a James Gunn-heightened, grammatical bants sort of way. I want to see teens once more dreaming of having their bylines in big, glossy magazines. Or fictional bands and actors excited to see their names written out in potent ink. More "hot off the press!", less "stick it through the CMS". As Miranda Priestly once said: "Everybody wants to be us." Hollywood needs to be reminded of that.

THE PATH TO PANDORA IN EMPIRE EVERY MONTH

# The sky's the limit

## THE AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH STUNT TEAM ON DEFYING GRAVITY WITH ONE OF THEIR BIGGEST BATTLES YET

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

THE *AVATAR* MOVIES are renowned for their epic action sequences. From the destruction of Hometree in the first film to the climactic sea-based showdown in *The Way Of Water*, James Cameron and his team have continued to push the boundaries with extensive performance capture and dazzling CG visuals. *Fire And Ash* is no different, with a battle high up in the clouds.

It sees the Sully family — some of whom are travelling on the airborne ships of the Wind Traders — fall under attack from the Ash People, aka the Mangkwan Clan. The ships are pulled by windrays (large, stingray-like creatures), and float thanks to medusoids (even larger, gas-filled Pandoran jellyfish). It is, as second-unit director Garrett Warren teases, "a cross between a pirate-ship [invasion] and an air-to-air combat battle, with the ikran, the flying creatures that move through the air [ridden by both sides], like fighter jets". Here, Warren and second-unit stunt co-ordinator Steve Brown talk us through how they marshalled mayhem high above Pandora.

### DRAWING UP BLUEPRINTS

After reading the scene in screenplay form, Warren and Brown worked closely with Cameron to design the action beats. "We'd tape down on the floor some ideas for what it would be like to attack [a ship]," Warren explains. "Then [Cameron] says, 'Let me get [into] the space with you and talk over the reality of it.' And then we collaborate with him." But the filmmaker isn't just involved on a theoretical level. As to be expected from Cameron, he gets

# THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

### KOCKROACH

Oscar Isaac, Channing Tatum and **Zazie Beetz** will lead *Captain Fantastic* filmmaker Matt Ross' upcoming New York crime drama. Set to start shooting in January from a Jonathan Ames script, the movie follows a mysterious stranger's ascension through NYC's criminal ranks.

### STAR WARS: STARFIGHTER

With cameras now rolling on Shawn Levy's new franchise instalment, the film's constellation of stars has expanded. **Aaron Pierre** and Amy Adams will star opposite Ryan Gosling, Mia Goth and Matt Smith in the movie, releasing on May 28, 2027.

### THUMB

Having recently wrapped Super-spin-off *Supergirl*, **Milly Alcock** has landed the lead in Daina Oniunas-Pusić's new dark comedy. Here, Alcock will play a lonely woman who mistakenly receives a severed thumb and makes reuniting it with its owner her life's obsession.

**Clockwise from main:** Battling it out — an Ash Warrior takes on Peylak (David Thewlis); Orchestrating action on a performance-capture stage; Director James Cameron and Garrett Warren.

into technical details, too — from the velocity at which the ikran fly, to the effort it would take to jump from one onto a Wind Traders ship. "As creative as Jim is as a storyteller, he also has an engineer's mind," Brown confirms.

## TESTING THE WIND

Despite Pandora being a fantastical world brought fully to life by visual effects, making the performance-capture element as practical as possible was a huge priority for Warren, Brown and Cameron. For this sequence, they replicated the airships by building an aluminium structure that was 100 feet long and 33 feet high. For characters on ikran, Warren designed a variation of a "marionette puppet" that allowed the performer to manoeuvre as if actually on the creature. There's real flying, real falling ("Steve basically had to jump off a moving bird the same way the Ash Warriors do," says Warren. "There were a couple of good faceplants") — and even real fire ("We want people to feel the heat," Warren explains). All of this means that even when they're in those black suits, "We don't have to use our imagination," says Brown. "This is Jim Cameron, you know?" laughs Warren. "We're not doing stuff for fake."

## TAKING FLIGHT

The sequence took around two weeks to shoot on a soundstage in Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles, including time on set with the actors and stunt performers, and capturing new ideas as Cameron came up with them. The team then did it all over again in New Zealand — "Where we used any kind of human interaction, we basically shot it twice," Warren explains. Yet even with the bulk of the work done, there is always room for improvement. "It felt like we were always polishing, always revisiting, always tightening," Brown recalls. "Until the movie comes out, I feel like we're still working on it." Though there are still finishing touches to be made, the pair do get to see cuts in fully realised CGI along the way. "It's even better than we envisaged it," Brown smiles. Sounds like all those faceplants were worth it.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM DECEMBER 19**

### THE PIRATE

**Jason Momoa** and David Leitch are looking to hit the high seas for a buzzy, buccaneering new actioner. Plot specifics on the movie — which Momoa is producing and might also star in — are under wraps for now, but the elevator pitch is a doozy: "*The Raid* set on a pirate ship."

### TOMB RAIDER

**Sophie Turner** is taking over the dual pistols from Alicia Vikander to play Lara Croft in Amazon's fresh take on the iconic video-game adventurer. Phoebe Waller-Bridge is writing and will co-showrun the series alongside Chris Hodge, with plans for production to get going in January.

### HARRY POTTER SERIES

**Warwick Davis** is set to wand-swish and flick his way back to Hogwarts for Mark Mylod and Francesca Gardiner's Wizarding World reboot. Davis is the first actor to reprise his role from the film franchise, returning as Charms professor Filius Flitwick for the HBO series. Shooting is underway.

### THE INITIATIVE

**Angelina Jolie** is getting back in espionage-y action for Doug Liman's new thriller. Pitched as "*Training Day* set in the world of spycraft", the movie — set to start shooting in January — follows a rogue agent (Jolie) whose newest recruit is suspicious of her unorthodox methods.

### MAGIC

Richard Attenborough's 1978 cult ventriloquist horror classic is about to be reanimated by genre master **Sam Raimi** and *Weapons* producer Roy Lee. The duo will steer the remake, which will tell the story of a mentally unstable magician and his increasingly murderous dummy.

Getty Images

# The Spotlight

# Frank Dillane

## THE *URCHIN* STAR IS TURNING A NEW PAGE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

**DOMIZIA SALUSESTI**

FRANK DILLANE WANTS to make it clear that he opens his own doors. "Tom Cruise jumps out of all his [own] planes, I open all my own doors," he tells *Empire* with a laugh from a park in London. This disclaimer comes after a few injuries Dillane has accumulated over recent years have been discussed, and he wants to make plain his career is not all as intense and debilitating as it sounds.

First there was the back injury he got while playing an enigmatic highwayman in Disney+ series *Renegade Nell*. Then for his starring role in Harris Dickinson's upcoming directorial debut *Urchin* — in which Dillane plays a recovering addict attempting to find his place in society — he busted his shoulder. The war wound was the result of adopting a perpetually tense, hunched-over physicality while shooting. "I remember drawing my character Mike at one point, and in each joint I would [write] a different trauma," he recalls. "So the shoulder held the time that *this* thing happened, his foot was bent in that way from the time that he did *this* and *that*."

Dillane describes those physical demands as necessary. "It is really exhausting, living without a house," he explains. "Your bags are really heavy; you're walking all day. Even when you're lying down to sleep, you're never really resting." Which isn't to say that *Urchin* is without humour: it also required Dillane to find the funny side in Mike's dark situation. His commitment paid off — he scooped up the Un Certain Regard Best Actor award after the film's world premiere at this year's Cannes. "It was truly gob-smacking," he remembers of the win, part of his monumental journey with *Urchin* so far. "It's changed my life."

The son of actors Stephen Dillane and Naomi Wirthner, film has long been baked into the actor's life. "My mum informed my taste in movie stars," he remembers. "I loved Marlon Brando and Mickey Rourke." At 16, he made his first major

**Above and right:** Frank Dillane, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in London on August 22, 2025. **Far right:** As homeless Londoner Mike in *Urchin*.

## BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

**THE BOOK**
***ROADSIDE PICNIC*** **BY ARKADY AND BORIS STRUGATSKY**
"It's about a zone created after aliens landed on Earth. [Some people have] just gone into the zone and one of them had a cobweb on his shoulder that he didn't notice. So I'm pretty sure he's going to turn into an alien."

**THE PODCAST**
***THE REST IS HISTORY***
"It's with Dominic Sandbrook and Tom Holland, and they just do different stuff on history. The last episode was on the assassination of JFK."

**THE ALBUM**
***SMILEY SMILE*** **BY THE BEACH BOYS**
"I've just been really enjoying harmonies, so I'm listening to them, and Insecure Men and Mozart. I love Mozart at the moment."

big-screen appearance as Tom Riddle (young Voldemort) in *Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince*. "I looked about nine when I watched it back," Dillane laughs. The audition process was long and gruelling, but proved a formative experience for him as a teen. "I didn't really know what acting was [before then]," he says.

After graduating from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in 2013, Dillane's career predominantly kicked off on the small screen. A supporting role in the Wachowskis' high-concept sci-fi show *Sense8* was followed by a major recurring gig in *Fear Of The Walking Dead* as Nick, a recovering drug addict and fan favourite. After four seasons, however, he asked to be written out. "The way [the show] was — addiction, dead people, everyone being killed and guns — kind of exhausted me," he admits. During an exit interview for *FOTWD*, Dillane said that he's never been very proud of his performances. "I rebuke past Frank for saying that," he exclaims. "I think Nick has had a real effect on people, maybe more than any of my characters. I still get people telling me how much he meant to them."

As that exit interview from 2018 suggests, Dillane's relationship with his craft hasn't always been straightforward. "At some point when I was disillusioned with [acting], I remember thinking, 'You know, Frank, you don't have to do any of this. You can just do something else completely.'" Giving himself the option to walk away, however, only made him more grateful for a career in storytelling. "I'm not very good at much else, let's be honest," he laughs. "I play music, I write, but I really am not a very well-rounded human being."

Those skills are likely to still take the actor in exciting new directions. Until then, at least he can open his own doors.

***URCHIN*** **IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 3**

Main: Cardigan: Moschino; Vest: Frank's own; Jeans: Moschino; Shoes: Frank's own. Inset: Grey suit: Moschino; T-shirt: Frank's own; Socks: Pantherella; Shoes: Moschino; Sunglasses: Jaques Marie Mage ('The Commander'). Styling: Karen Clarkson at The Wall Group. Styling assistant: Amelia Holden-Brown. Grooming: Stefan Bertin at A-Frame Agency using Danessa Myricks. Additional imagery: Jim Lee/DC

# WHERE NEXT FOR THE BIG BALD BAD?

**MAN OF TOMORROW PROMISES THE RETURN OF AN AMPED-UP LEX LUTHOR. HOW WORRIED SHOULD SUPERMAN BE?**

## A POWERED-UP SUIT

James Gunn's surprise social-media announcement of *Man Of Tomorrow* took the form of a single image by artist and DC Comics boss Jim Lee, showing Superman standing beside his nemesis Lex Luthor, the latter wearing a green and purple power suit. This lairy "warsuit" will be familiar to fans of Superman comics, in which the evil billionaire has donned it since the 1980s to tackle Superman head-on, backing up his mighty brain with brawn. It seems that Lex (Nicholas Hoult) won't be staying in super-villain prison Belle Reve for long.

## NOT A STRAIGHTFORWARD SEQUEL

Gunn has rather cryptically described the movie as "the next story in what I'll call the 'Superman Saga'," and has insisted it won't be a traditional follow-up — hence the title being *Man Of Tomorrow* (the character's next-most-popular tagline after Man Of Steel) rather than 'Superman Vol 2'. Indeed, some have suggested the title could actually refer to Luthor, with industry rumour-mongers already pushing the idea of Hoult as the movie's "co-lead".

## A TEAM-UP MOVIE

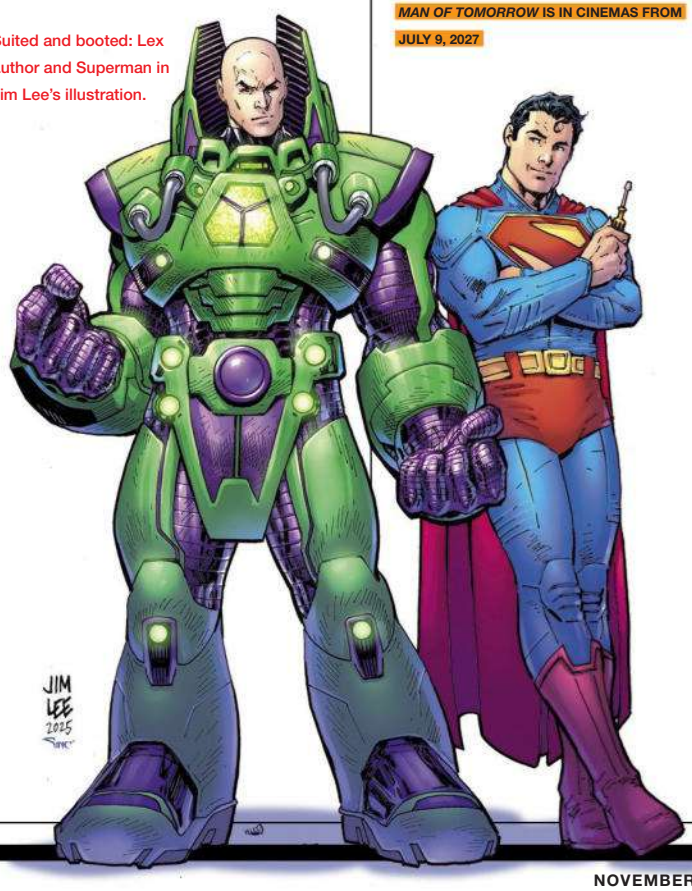
Gunn has confirmed that Lex and Superman will be working together to take on a "much, much bigger threat". The proof is there in Lee's artwork, which shows Superman holding a screwdriver (presumably used to either build or help maintain the warsuit). And with Isabela Merced seemingly confirming that she'll be returning as well, the whole Justice Gang may have to get on side with their shady new ally.

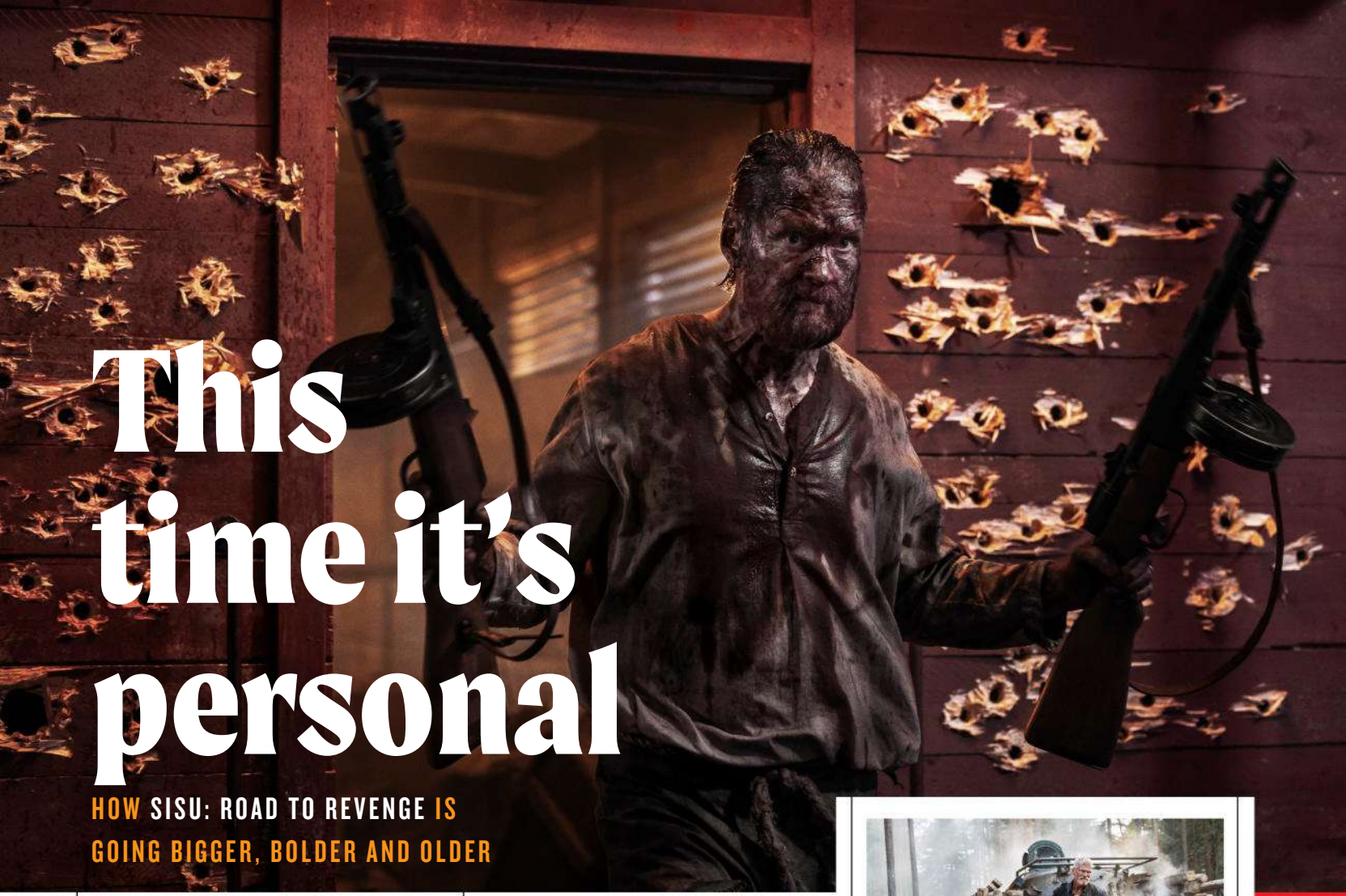
## A NEW FOE

So who will Gunn choose from the vast Supes rogues' gallery? General Zod feels too obvious — though wouldn't it be fun if Bradley Cooper's Jor-El somehow survived and takes on the Kryptonian baddie mantle instead? Otherwise, our money is on Brainiac, the alien android who likes shrinking and bottling cities — a very silly MO that arguably only Gunn could make work on the big screen. It should also be noted that an additional image by Mitch Gerads, shared via Hoult, still shows Lex and Superman trading blows, so expect more continued antagonism there. Keep your enemies close and all that. **DAN JOLIN**

***MAN OF TOMORROW*** **IS IN CINEMAS FROM JULY 9, 2027**

Suited and booted: Lex Luthor and Superman in Jim Lee's illustration.





# This time it's personal

## HOW SISU: ROAD TO REVENGE IS GOING BIGGER, BOLDER AND OLDER

WORDS **HAYLEY CAMPBELL**

LAST TIME *EMPIRE* spoke to writer-director Jalmari Helander, he was fresh out of ideas for how to kill Nazis. He had used them all up in 2022's surprise hit *Sisu*, his film set in the last desperate days of World War II, when Nazis were in retreat from northern Finland, destroying everything and everyone in their path. Until they met Aatami (Jorma Tommila), a lone Finnish prospector who simply refused to die. With his imminent sequel *Sisu: Road To Revenge*, however, Helander has found a way to cook up more creative kills. "I changed the Nazis to different bad guys!" he grins. "So, I somehow found a lot of cool ways again. I don't know why my brain is good at thinking of something like that, but that's my superpower."

Once again, Helander — who hails from Helsinki — is digging deep into Finnish history to tell more of Aatami's story. "Back in World World II, when we made peace with Russia, [Finland] had to give some land to Russians," he explains. "So there were 420,000 people who were left without homes because they had to move to their new side of the border." This is where we find Aatami: displaced in Russia, wanting his home back. It was the scene of his family's brutal murder, and all he has left of them.

So he goes and gets it: dismantling the logs that built it, sticking them on the back of a truck, and driving it (and his faithful dog) back to Finland where he will rebuild it in his family's honour.

Or at least, that's the plan, until the Red Army commander who killed them (Stephen Lang) comes back to finish the job. "When the idea came, I was renovating my own house," says Helander. "Suddenly I had the idea of, 'What is Aatami doing?'" Helander put down his tools and started writing. Two months later he had a finished script. (We don't know if he has a finished house.)

This sequel is a more personal, emotional story for Aatami, but there is no scrimping on the action. "He's trying to transport his own home, which is *really* emotional cargo — and much more difficult to move around than a bag of gold (*his bounty in* Sisu), so the action is bigger and the stakes higher," says Helander. He has also always wanted to do a film where speed is part of the action, and trucks move faster than the horses used in the first film.

Finding the right villain to go up against Tommila's relentless Aatami was a long process. It was the film's studio, Sony, who suggested Lang. "I immediately thought it was a really good idea to have *another* older dude," says Helander, who admits he has this "weird thing" about this particular demographic. "I'm 50 next year and I think of myself as a boy. If I have tough men in my movies, they have to be older than I am," he laughs. Tommila was 64 when they shot *Sisu 2,* and Lang was 71. "It might be more difficult when I'm 60 or 70, and I need even *older* men. Another solution might be that someday I feel like a man. But that hasn't happened yet."

The future might hold another *Sisu* instalment. Helander says he has the beginnings of an idea, but he's keeping quiet for now. *Empire* safely predicts: even older dudes.

**Top to bottom:** Aatami (Jorma Tommila) is going great guns; Red Army commander (Stephen Lang) is on the hunt; Aatami is on the move; Director/writer Jalmari Helander.

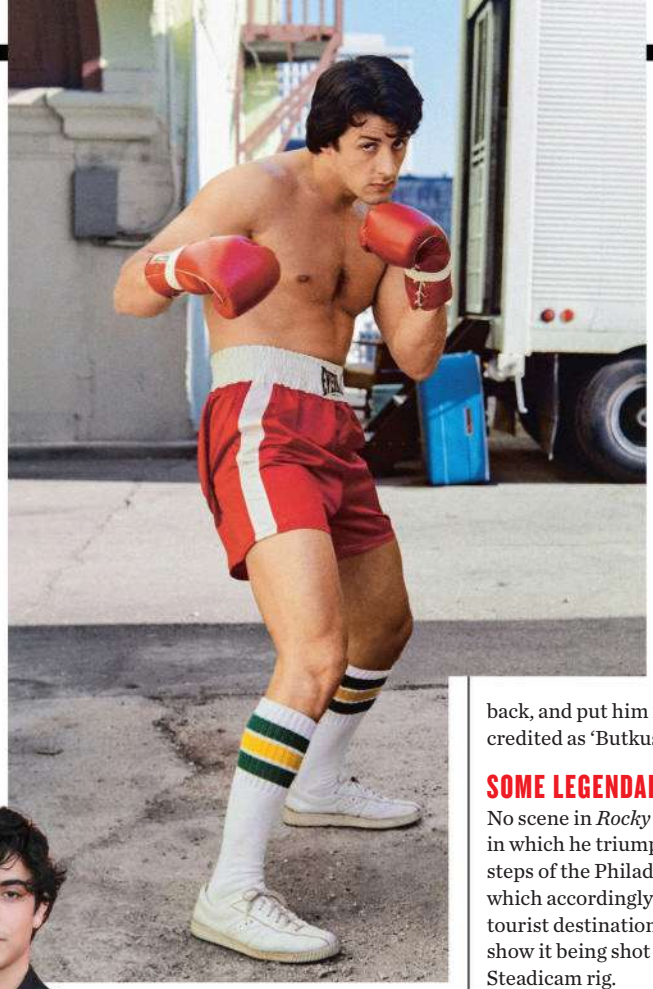
***SISU: ROAD TO REVENGE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 21**

Alamy, Getty Images, HeritageAuctions.com

# GET READY TO GO THE DISTANCE

**_ROCKY_ TURNED A NOBODY INTO A STAR. HERE'S WHAT WE WANT TO SEE IN THE FILM ABOUT ITS MAKING, I PLAY ROCKY**

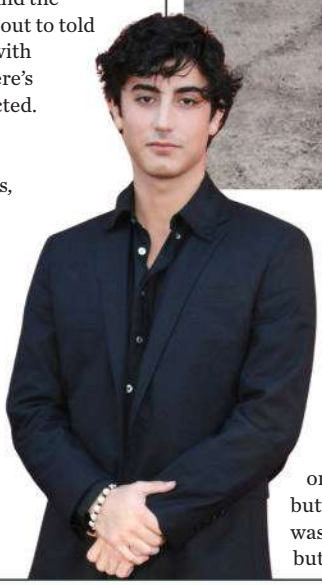
BACK IN THE mid-1970s, Sylvester Stallone couldn't get arrested: so un-famous was the aspiring actor that he was reduced to playing muggers in Woody Allen films. So he took matters into his own beefy hands, writing a script called *Rocky* about a wannabe boxing champ. The creation of that film, which ended up storming both the box office and the Oscars, is a wild story. And it's about to told in Peter Farrelly's *I Play Rocky,* with Anthony Ippolito as Stallone. Here's a few things we hope to see depicted.



**Clockwise from left:** Boxing clever: Stallone in a promo shot for *Rocky* (1976); One man and his dog; Anthony Ippolito plays Stallone in the new movie.

## A DESPERATE SLY

He'd worked some gruesome jobs, including hacking the heads off fish, and had $106 in the bank. So Stallone flung himself into *Rocky* with frantic resolve. Inspired by a fight between Muhammad Ali and underdog Chuck Wepner, he stayed awake for three-and-a-half days straight writing the script. He also insisted on playing the lead role, Rocky Balboa, despite studio United Artists wanting Burt Reynolds instead.



## A FARTING DOG

Stallone had few Hollywood contacts, but did have a loyal dog, 140 lb Bullmastiff Butkus, who unfortunately had a serious flatulence problem. "I almost considered whittling a cork and blocking up the foul passage," he said once, referring to Butkus' butthole. At one point Stallone was so broke he had to sell his pet, but luckily managed to buy him back, and put him in both *Rocky* and *Rocky II*, credited as 'Butkus Stallone'.

## SOME LEGENDARY STEPS

No scene in *Rocky* is as iconic as the one in which he triumphantly jogs up the 72 stone steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which accordingly has become a popular tourist destination. Surely the new film will show it being shot using the then-new Steadicam rig.

## A WILD AWARDS SHOW

Despite being dirt-cheap and starring a nobody, Rocky captured the hearts of the world, becoming 1976's biggest hit. It also stormed the Oscars, winning Best Picture. Stallone went along and shadow-boxed the actual Muhammad Ali on-stage, and though he won neither Best Actor or Best Original Screenplay, it was the start of a wild career. Put simply: no *Rocky*, no *Tango & Cash*. Try to imagine that. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

***I PLAY ROCKY* DOES NOT CURRENTLY HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

# DO YOUR BLEAK HOUSE BIDDING

**GUILLERMO DEL TORO IS AUCTIONING OFF PART OF HIS LEGENDARY PERSONAL ARCHIVE. HERE ARE SOME HIGHLIGHTS**

### 1 BERNIE WRIGHTSON FRANKENSTEIN ILLUSTRATION

**CURRENT BID: $200,000**

This illustration plate is adapted directly from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel by horror master Wrightson. The most expensive item at the auction, it sits close to del Toro's heart, and for the price of a small house it can sit close to yours as well.

### 2 CRONOS VAMPIRE DEVICE

**CURRENT BID: $4,600**

Fancy a shot at eternal life? Well, this is as close as you'll get, with a precise replica of the egg-shaped immortality-granter from del Toro's '92 vampire movie. A fair warning that this ornate, golden device will cause an unquenchable thirst for blood as a side effect. A steal nonetheless!

### 3 PACIFIC RIM ESCAPE POD

**CURRENT BID: $30,000**

Whether you want to dodge the apocalypse or just need some peace at a party, this screen-used vessel is just the solution. If this padded pod, bearing the film's 'Gipsy Danger' logo, can endure the Universal Studios backlot lake, the sky's the limit. It even comes with flotation bladders.

### 4 HELLBOY TRENCH COAT

**CURRENT BID: $40,000**

Autumn is upon us, so what better way to keep cosy than with this demon-chic duster coat? Straight from Ron Perlman's shoulders, this battle-worn garment even has one sleeve shorter than the other, should you also be packing a Right Hand Of Doom. **BETH WEBB**

**THE GUILLERMO DEL TORO COLLECTION: BLEAK HOUSE PART 1 WILL RUN UNTIL SEPTEMBER 26**

# The unsung heroes raising the roof

## *EMPIRE* DIVES INTO THE WILD AND WEIRD WORLD OF LOOPING, A SPECIALIST FORM OF VOICE ACTING

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

**MARCO VITTUR**

YOU'VE HEARD THEM, but you haven't seen them. You might know their voices, but you almost certainly won't know their faces. They are loop groups, small but dedicated bands of specialist voice actors whose jobs it is to bring scenes to life via ADR (Automated Dialogue Replacement), or looping. And yes, they do it as a group (hence the name), bringing an extra layer of veracity to whatever it is they're asked to do. And that can be, well, "anything from battle scenes to markets to weddings", says Angela Christofilou, an experienced ADR artist and loop grouper, who has lent her voice to the likes of *Gladiator II*. "You have to use a lot of physicality," she tells *Empire*. "On *Gladiator*, it felt like a proper workout. We were also running — it was an outdoor ADR session. We had to run up and down, screaming things like, 'I'll kill you!' for five hours."

Christofilou is drawn to looping because of its unpredictability: no two days are the same, no two sessions are the same, and it throws up all kinds of challenges, quite often with actors walking around a microphone in a circle, playing a different character, with a different voice and accent, each time they pass, all the better to simulate the hubbub of a crowd. "If you're doing Viking-age [sessions], you can't start saying, 'Yeah, I'll text you, mate,'" laughs Christofilou. "It has to be the era you're doing. So you can't use slang, you can't use swear words. We are improvising."

For a long time, loop groups went relatively unnoticed and uncredited. Recently, though, movies have begun to credit loop groups, both collectively and individually, and the companies who employ them. One such company is Sync Or Swim, a British agency that has been giving a voice to the voiceless since 2003. Phoebe Scholfield, an actor herself, runs the company, having taken the reins after her husband, Jay Benedict ("one of the original loopers"), sadly passed away during the pandemic. "We've never advertised, and we still don't have a website," says Scholfield, who's like a one-person A-Team of ADR: "You can't find me unless you really want to find me."

**Above:** Giving it collective welly. **Right:** Sync Or Swim founder Phoebe Scholfield. **Left, top to bottom:** ADR artist Angela Christofilou; *28 Years Later; Gladiator II*; In full voice.

Luckily, tons of people want to find her. "I'm now doing between 120 and 150 films and TV projects a year," she says. One of the recent ones was *28 Years Later*. "We needed to find people who could do 'infected' voices," she says. "We needed to have some Swedish soldiers. And Danny [Boyle] is a very hands-on director; he always comes in to [watch a] loop group. He's incredibly appreciative of the level of talent in the room."

Typically, Scholfield will be sent a series of documents that identify the cues that need to be recorded. She then matches the 3,000 actors in her database to those cues, booking them in for

Photographed exclusively for *Empire* at Goldcrest Post Production, Soho, London.

Marco Vittur. Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

recording sessions. "Some of those cues will be, 'It's Jenny's birthday party, she's 60 years old,'" she explains. "So that's 40-to-60-year-olds. But then Jenny goes to pick up her grandchildren from school, so I maybe need 16-to-25-year-olds who can sound convincingly like children. You have to use really good, incredibly skilled actors."

While loop groups are often composed of actors like Christofilou, who count it as a major source of income (the minimum fee for half a day's work is around £300), some of them feature bigger names than you might expect. "I have household names come in and work for me," says Scholfield. "They love the anonymity of it." So maybe you do recognise their voices, after all... Hang on, was that Brad Pitt in the background of last week's *EastEnders*?

# NEED TO KNOW

## GET UP TO SPEED ON... HIGHLANDER

### IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING

Concerned with tales of immortal warriors battling across the ages, *Highlander* is a fantasy saga that spans oceans of time. Somewhat aptly, then, the journey towards rebooting the 1986 classic for the big screen feels just as long. Over the past 17 years, the directorial dragon-head *katana* has passed from Justin Lin to Juan Carlos Fresnadillo to Cedric Nicolas-Troyan, while rumoured heroic Connor MacLeods (Ryan Reynolds, James McAvoy) and villainous Kurgans (Vinnie Jones, Ray Stevenson) have all come and gone.

### CHAD STAHELSKI IS CALLING THE SHOTS

The stuntman-turned-filmmaker has been attached to helm the swords-and-sorcery franchise's revamp since 2016, with the project officially announced in 2023. What's more, the *John Wick* director — a self-professed fan of Russell Mulcahy's OG film since childhood — has reteamed with *John Wick: Chapter 4* scribe Michael Finch for this passion project, which relocates most of the action, according to Stahelski, "from the early 1500s in the Highlands to the beyond present-day New York and Hong Kong".

### THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE... HENRY CAVILL

The former Superman signed up to play immortal hero MacLeod's latest incarnation in 2021. With Cavill himself a lifelong fan of the film, Stahelski enticed him onto the project with the promise of playing a hero forged over half a millennium. "You get to experience someone that's trained over 500 years and sort of played [with many types of] martial arts," said the filmmaker. Cavill, it seems, has risen to the challenge. "If you thought you'd seen me do swordwork before, you haven't seen anything yet," he told fans at CinemaCon 2024.

### THE ENSEMBLE IS STACKED

Russell Crowe was recently announced as following in Sean Connery's footsteps here as Ramirez, MacLeod's immortal mentor. Dave Bautista is playing barbarian big-bad the Kurgan; *Industry* breakout Marisa Abela is aboard as MacLeod's past love, an all-new immortal swordmaster; while Karen Gillan will be Heather, MacLeod's mortal wife.

### WE KNOW WHEN — AND WHERE — *HIGHLANDER*'S FILMING

While promoting *Ballerina*, Stahelski confirmed plans to start shooting *Highlander* in London this month before jetting off to Scotland and Hong Kong. A new *Highlander* is, *finally*, coming soon to a cinema near you. "Alexa, play 'Princes Of The Universe'..." **JORDAN KING**

***HIGHLANDER* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

# On A Role

# ETHAN HAWKE IS LORENZ HART

## THE ACTOR PLAYS A LEGENDARY LYRICIST IN RICHARD LINKLATER'S *BLUE MOON*

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

### THE HEIGHT

How do you make Ethan Hawke look more than half a foot shorter than he actually is? That wasn't just a practicality in *Blue Moon* (Linklater used "old-school stagecraft tricks" to present Hawke as 5' 2"). It was also key to cracking the mindset of a man who, on one of the hardest nights of his life — watching former collaborator Richard Rodgers (Andrew Scott) achieve game-changing success with his new writing partner as Broadway smash *Oklahoma!* debuts — simply can't stop talking. "[Lorenz] Hart's size is such a huge part of who he was, and what drove him, and why he thought the way he thought," Hawke explains of the American lyricist. "If somebody is 6' tall and they won't stop talking, they're trying to control the room. If somebody's 5' 2" and they won't stop talking, they're trying to be heard." It paints a portrait of a man "in terrible need".

**Top to bottom:** Lorenz Hart (Ethan Hawke); Hart looks up to Elizabeth (Margaret Qualley); Inspirations.

### THE ALBUM

Rodgers and Hart had many major hits of their own before Rodgers and Hammerstein (played by Simon Delaney in the film) became legendary. Try 'Have You Met Miss Jones?', or 'The Lady Is A Tramp', or 'My Funny Valentine', or (yes) 'Blue Moon'. "At the end of the year, my Spotify account told me I was the #1 Rodgers and Hart listener," says Hawke. His top pick? *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Rodgers And Hart Song Book*. "It's just staggering, I listened to it over and over and over again," he says. "I love her voice, and she does all the songs so beautifully." Hawke assembled a playlist featuring his favourite Hart lyrics. "Apparently he could write a song in a couple of minutes. Verbal dexterity is something that was fun for him. Finding the right word-choice was part of his daily game-plan, and I had to find that verbal dexterity within myself."

### THE CLASSIC FILM

*Blue Moon* is set in March 1943, just months after *Casablanca* premiered — a now-all-time-classic that's referenced and quoted by Hart and bartender Eddie (Bobby Cannavale) in Linklater's film. "I watched *Casablanca* a couple of times before we started," says Hawke. "When I watched it again, I was like, 'Wow, it's just *perfect*.' It's staggering." Seeing it afresh helped him imagine it as a contemporary work for Lorenz Hart. "It's a pop-culture reference to them. The same way that people right now are talking about whatever hit TV show, or Taylor Swift. *Casablanca* was the *Star Wars* of the moment. It really helped bring you into the period."

### THE PARTNERSHIP

Having worked so many times with Linklater, Hawke was able to "utilise years of trust and knowledge and experience" with his director — all to drive him deeper into the character. "He was not my friend during the production of this movie," laughs Hawke. "He was a scientist, hunting for this movie." Linklater was insistent on getting to the heart of Hart. "Rick was really merciless," Hawke recalls. "Whenever he saw *me*, he hated it. 'Get him out of there! I saw you!' I would make the crew laugh, or do something I thought was fun, and Rick would just look to me and say, 'Are you done now? Are we getting back to work now?'" And, action!

***BLUE MOON* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 14**

Getty Images, Lionsgate, Zoetrope

# THE COPPOLA DOC THAT CONFRONTS THE CHAOS

## MIKE FIGGIS ON HIS FRONT-ROW SEAT TO THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF MAKING *MEGALOPOLIS*

WHEN FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA began mounting his brash, brazen, bonkers $120 million opus *Megalopolis*, fellow filmmaker Mike Figgis' ears pricked up. "Almost as a joke, I wrote to [Coppola]," Figgis recalls, "and said, 'If you want a fly on the wall, I'm your guy.' Thinking: 'That'll never happen.' Then he suddenly emailed me and said, 'Could you be here in two weeks?'" Figgis, the director of *Leaving Las Vegas*, an episode of *The Sopranos* ('Cold Cuts') and a couple of documentaries, quickly became the film's official fly-on-the-wall documenter.

The result is *Megadoc*, a candid, feature-length portrait of either an epic artistic achievement or a financially ruinous folly, depending on who you listen to — one he hopes will enrich the film's infamous lore. "I had no idea what was gonna happen," Figgis says. "I said to Francis, 'You seem to thrive on chaos.' He vehemently denies it, but he does."

Figgis, shooting nimbly on a tiny camera that he operated, became a constant presence on set, which helped him capture some extraordinarily raw moments. His camera was present, for example, for an emergency meeting of the heads of department, halfway through shooting, which resulted in the VFX supervisor being fired and the production designer quitting. "When I got there, they'd already started the meeting," Figgis recalls. "I creep in, and I've got to try to find a way to get through without pissing anybody off, so I can get a shot on Francis. Eventually I found a position. But it was so tense."

**Top to bottom:** A high-concept *Megalopolis* scene is shot; Director Mike Figgis films Francis Ford Coppola; Adam Driver and Nathalie Emmanuel in Coppola's movie.

The result is an account not just of an eccentric, singular filmmaker, but the tensions of the creative process at large. Coppola is no stranger to such portraits; his late wife Eleanor directed *Hearts Of Darkness*, the classic 1991 behind-the-scenes document of *Apocalypse Now*'s turbulent shoot. Figgis was able to swap notes before her death in 2024. "We bonded over wearing the same brand of shoes," he says. Later, she watched a rough cut of *Megadoc* and offered some feedback. "One of her notes was: 'Francis looks too grumpy. You must have some shots where he's actually happy.' And it was a very good note. While he's never ecstatically happy, the balance is better now — to show his mood swings." From one Coppola documentarian to another, Figgis has captured yet another descent into cinematic mayhem, for posterity. **JOHN NUGENT**

***MEGADOC* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

# REFWENDS OF THE SITH

## *THE INBETWEENERS*' SIMON BIRD HAS JOINED **STAR WARS: STARFIGHTER**. HERE ARE THE CROSSOVER EVENTS WE'RE DYING TO SEE...

### BRIEFCASE RANCOR

Bird's role in the Shawn Levy sci-fi is yet to be revealed, but there's plenty of scope to bring his *Inbetweeners* character Will's energy to a galaxy far, far away. For example, fans know the bespectacled student is rarely without his corporate accessory, which could be handy for transporting lightsabers during interplanetary adventures.

### ROMANCE OF THE JEDI

"Feisty one, you are," became Will's iconic motto after deploying Yoda's topsy-turvy sentence structure in a bizarre attempt to flirt. *Starfighter* is a standalone story, so the chances of Bird's character meeting actual Yoda are slim to none, but hopefully a variant of the green guy will let him flex his Jedi jargon once again.

### THE PANT-OM MENACE

A stressful exam paired with a high energy-drink intake led to some drama downtown for Will. Of course, you're not required to do your A-levels in *Star Wars*, but what's more nerve-racking than jumping into hyperspace? Best to avoid Naboo's answer to Red Bull, or at least pack some industrial-strength undergarments. **BETH WEBB**

***STAR WARS: STARFIGHTER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM MAY 28, 2027**

# Kate Winslet takes her shot

## THE ACTOR MAKES HER DIRECTORIAL DEBUT WITH THE EMOTIONAL, PERSONAL FESTIVE DRAMA GOODBYE JUNE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

"I JUST DECIDED — 'Fuck it. I'm gonna do this.'" For years, Kate Winslet had been asked by colleagues and journalists — "I'm sure even people who I've spoken with at *Empire*" — if she would ever make the move into filmmaking. "I had thought to myself, 'How do I answer that question?'" she reflects. "I think that I've often said, 'I've been raising a family. I've got other things going on.' But actually, I realised that the reason that I hadn't directed before now was because I was probably scared."

Although the actor feels like she's been integrated into filmmaking over decades spent on set, she was aware that making a clean pivot was a big leap. "And I'm acutely aware of how much harder it is for actresses to turn into directors than it is for our male counterparts," she explains. "I do believe there is a good deal more scrutiny placed on: 'Can they or can't they do it? What are they going to come up with?'"

What she came up with was *Goodbye June*, a Christmas-set family drama that her son Joe Anders wrote while at screenwriting school. When he presented his work to Winslet — which follows a terminally ill matriarch's final weeks in hospital with her loved ones — she saw potential and came aboard as producer and to play one of June's daughters, Julia. Then it came to discussing potential directors. "I suddenly realised I felt so close to it that I couldn't imagine giving it away."

She drew up a wishlist of actors with Anders, some of whom she had worked with before, and all agreed to partake. Andrea Riseborough — who co-starred with Winslet in war biopic *Lee* — signed on early as Julia's estranged sister, Molly; Johnny Flynn and Toni Collette play fellow siblings Connor and Helen, with Timothy Spall as their father Bernie and Helen Mirren as June. "It was very important not to set her up as the perfect, cosy parent," says Winslet of the title character. "When you're dealing with loss, sometimes vaguely uncomfortable, humorous things can happen. So it was important to be as real about that side of what's happening to June as possible."

Filming lasted for 35 days, with Mirren — the film's anchor — available to shoot for just 16. "I had no option but to just throw myself at it with as much energy as I could muster and just keep going," Winslet recalls. "It was proper, fast-paced British filmmaking in that sense." The actor has taken on more producing work in recent years, championing projects like *Lee* and an episode of Channel 4 drama *I Am Ruth*, in which she starred with daughter Mia Threapleton. And now, the experience of making *Goodbye June* has opened her up to the possibility of stepping behind the camera again. "I'm not saying, 'Oh, it all came naturally to me,' because I don't want anything to ever come naturally to me. That's not who I am," she says. But speaking with *Empire* from the edit bay, it's clear that she wouldn't want to be anywhere else. "I'm relishing every single day," she enthuses. Sometimes you really do just have to say, "Fuck it."

**Top to bottom:** Kate Winslet giving direction on set; In her role as Julia, with Toni Collette, who plays her sister Helen; Chatting to Timothy Spall, who plays dad Bernie.

***GOODBYE JUNE* WILL BE IN CINEMAS FROM DECEMBER 12 AND ON NETFLIX FROM DECEMBER 24**

Getty Images

# THE MVP

MEET OUR HERO OF THE MONTH

## CHARISSA BARTON

**THE CHOREOGRAPHER OF *PEACEMAKER* SEASON 2'S OPENING CREDITS**

**Was it your mission to outdo your work on Season 1's credit sequence?**
A note I gave myself was, "Don't hold back." Working with a lot more bodies automatically made it bigger. James [Gunn] pitched a different song [Foxy Shazam's 'Oh Lord']. It's a different tempo. I said, "I'll find a way to keep the energy up."

**Season 2 goes to some emotional places. Did you want that reflected in the choreography?**
Yes. As the season goes on, you'll see more of the story in the movements. One thing that's obvious is the love story [between Chris 'Peacemaker' Smith and Emilia Harcourt]. It's the heart of the season.

**Is John Cena a natural mover and shaker?**
He can take concepts that are new to him and his body, and find things quickly. In Season 1, a lot of the actors were like, "James is saying we're doing this, but I don't know..." For the second season, John showed up and went, "Let's do this!"

**How did you approach working with CGI mascot Eagly this time?**
I love Eagly so much! I had so many different variations [for him] that I sent to James that ultimately he was like, "Stop choreographing the bird! That's the animators' job!" James did the [mocap dance] moves for Eagly. I was filming [him] from off the stage, like, "I've got the goods now!" **JAMIE GRAHAM**

***PEACEMAKER* SEASON 2 IS OUT NOW ON SKY MAX AND NOW**

# A TOXIC RELATIONSHIP WITH A TWIST

## OSGOOD PERKINS FINDS THE DARKER SIDE OF LOVE IN NEW HORROR KEEPER

OSGOOD PERKINS IS not a director who shies away from influences. *Longlegs* was his tribute to *The Silence Of The Lambs*. *The Monkey* was his love letter to legendary animators Chuck Jones and Tex Avery. Now, his latest, *Keeper*, takes its cue from an unlikely source as it dares to ask the biggest question of them all: what is the deal with relationships? "It's almost like a *Seinfeld* episode in terms of its set-up," laughs Perkins. "You can see George Costanza and Jerry Seinfeld talking about it, because there are certain hinges in any relationship. It's our first time meeting the parents, it's our first time [out] in the country. It just focuses on one of those, and it gets pretty ragged."

Not that any *Seinfeld* episode was ever as dark and fucked-up as *Keeper* — which Perkins shot before he made *The Monkey* — promises to be. The hinge here is that a couple (Tatiana Maslany's Liz and Rossif Sutherland's Malcolm) go away for the first time, to his cabin in the woods. But they're not alone. "Something lives at the cabin," says Perkins. "Of course it does. It's been there a minute, and it's had its way with lots of people before it [has] its way with Liz and Malcolm."

Okay, so it's perhaps more *The Shining* than *Seinfeld*. Or maybe a little *McCabe & Mrs. Miller,* too. "'What if we just pretended this was like if Robert Altman made another horror movie after *Images*," says Perkins, "and made a grown-up horror movie about people on a vacation in the woods?'" The setting allowed Perkins to dive into the murky depths of romance. "I'm taking the opportunity to examine, 'What's the worst version of a man in a relationship,'" he says, "'and how does [Liz] bring her own stuff to it?' I think that *Keeper* created an opportunity to find the monster in a relationship."

Perkins' next horror film on his increasingly prolific roster pivots from monsters to something potentially even scarier: young people. In fact, the restless filmmaker is just about to start shooting *The Young People*, starring Nico Parker and Lola Tung. "It's an old dad's lament on the state of the world today as our children experience it," he teases. "*The Young People* is easily my most brutal movie. By far." What is the deal with that? **CHRIS HEWITT**

***KEEPER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 14**

**Top to bottom:** Liz (Tatiana Maslany) and Malcolm (Rossif Sutherland); Altered images; Director Osgood Perkins behind the camera.

# Getting to the heart of Marty

## REBECCA MILLER ON CRAFTING AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF AN ICONIC DIRECTOR IN DOCU-SERIES MR. SCORSESE

WORDS **CHRISTINA NEWLAND**

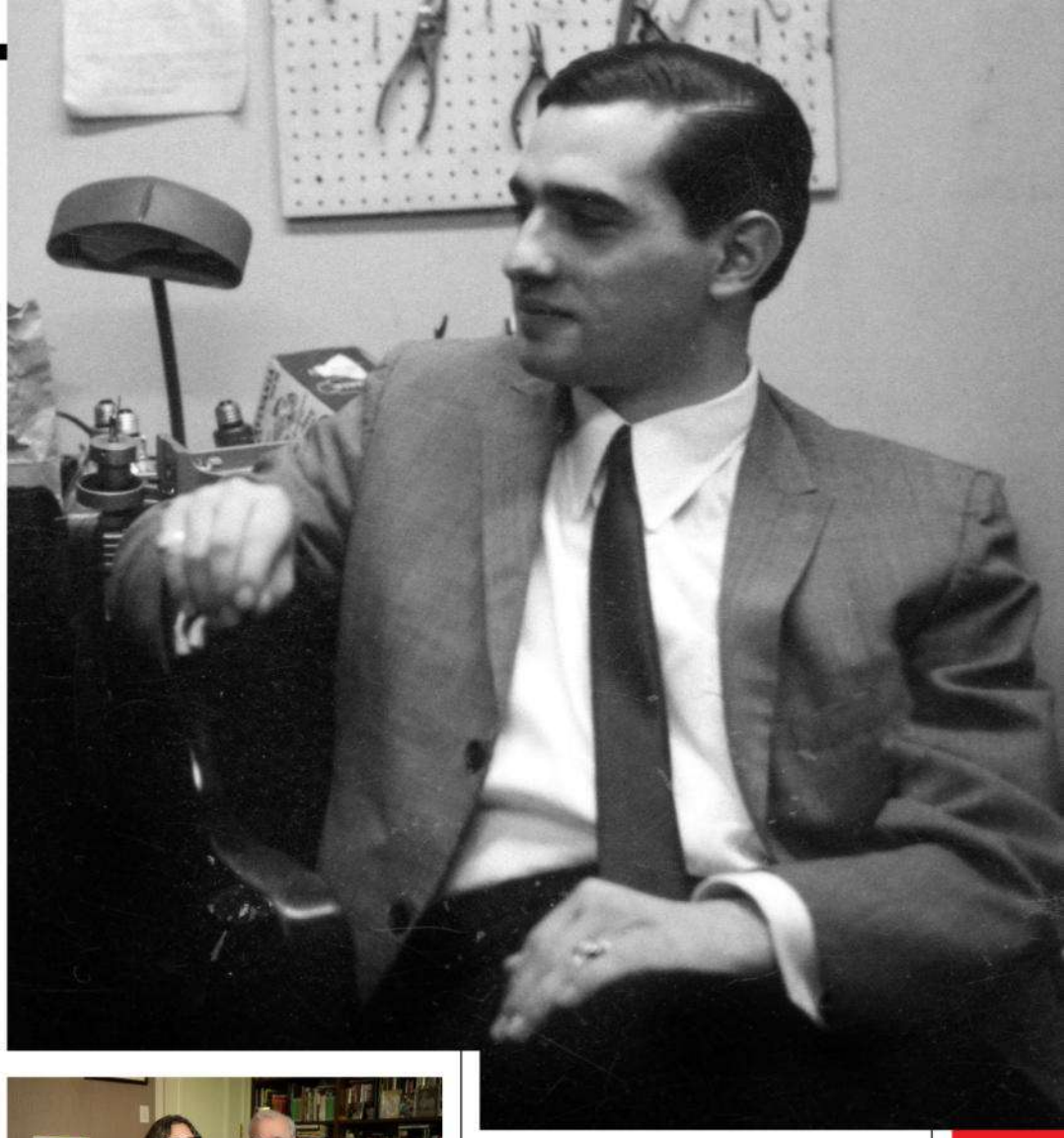
ASK FILMMAKER REBECCA Miller what her first impression was of Martin Scorsese and she doesn't hesitate: "He was so *alive.* He was so *not* complacent," she says. She first met the director on the set of *Gangs Of New York*, while her husband Daniel Day-Lewis starred in the movie, and they formed a relationship that led to her documentary series *Mr. Scorsese.* Here, she tells *Empire* about some of her discoveries.

### HE KNEW ALL THE REAL WISEGUYS

Scorsese's upbringing in New York's rough-and-tumble Little Italy, and how it influenced his fascination with violence and crime, is well known. But *Mr. Scorsese* gets access to the real people who inspired the cinema legend. Including a guy nicknamed Sally Gaga — the basis for Robert De Niro's daredevil psychopath Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets* — who agreed to make an appearance. "He was this elusive character that nobody thought would speak to me. Most people didn't think he was alive. Marty couldn't believe it when he saw we got him on camera," Miller says. He couldn't talk about a lot of his exploits, but really *did* once blow up a mailbox, just like Johnny Boy does in the film. He just can't remember *why.*

### WOMEN ARE CRUCIAL TO HIS CAREER

Margot Robbie recounts being asked to workshop and rewrite a major scene in her breakout film, *The Wolf Of Wall Street* — in which her character, Naomi, asks for a divorce. Through an impromptu all-night writing workshop with Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio, they turned it from "flat" into a frantic psychodrama. Far from being a "macho" director, the documentary highlights that Scorsese's collaborations with other women have been just as notable. "Sharon Stone's interview was actually particularly interesting, because she really confronts head on the fact that [the set of *Casino* was] a boys' club," Miller recalls. "But at a certain point when she really needed [Scorsese], he was completely there."



**Top to bottom:** A portrait of the artist as a young man — Scorsese in the mid-1960s; With director Rebecca Miller; And with longtime collaborator Robert De Niro.

### HE'S A PERFECTIONIST

During his childhood, Scorsese would draw storyboard-style comic-book sketches of a sword-and-sandals epic. Even then, he was trying to master the crane shot. As Miller says: "When we saw his storyboards I said, 'We've got to animate these.' I was so interested in how he's still trying to [perfect] this shot." This meticulous approach extends to working with actors. In the series, Leonardo DiCaprio recounts doing over 30 takes of a shot in *The Aviator*, which sees him speak with Cate Blanchett through a locked door. Scorsese didn't want to instruct DiCaprio so much as let him figure out what to do differently, no matter how long it took.

### HE IS A 'METHOD' DIRECTOR

It's hard to imagine a time when Scorsese was in the doldrums. But here, he speaks openly about his mental-health difficulties. "One of the things that really struck me was how many times he failed," Miller says. "He was fired from his first job as a director. John Cassavetes called one of his films [a piece] of shit. Even after he became an icon, he fell down and was written off." From commercial flops to fits of rage which saw him consider bringing a gun to threaten studio heads, it has been a wild ride. "The work affects him so deeply that it changes him as a human being. Knowing how vulnerable he's been — it's what makes him a great artist," explains Miller. In *Mr. Scorsese,* that conviction seems to be as strong as it ever was.

***MR. SCORSESE*** **IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM OCTOBER 17**

# THE HELL-FIGHTING HOUND MAKING HEADLINES

## HOW GOOD BOY'S FILMMAKER COLLARED A CANINE STAR FOR HIS BUZZY HORROR DEBUT

SOMETIMES ALL YOU NEED to hook audiences is a great logline. Case in point: "a horror movie from the perspective of a dog", the killer sell that has helped make Ben Leonberg's *Good Boy* one of the most talked-about indie films of the year. Then came its trailer, which caused a 2,000 per cent spike in Google searches asking if the starring canine dies. "Dogs are such an easy character to click into because people instantly love them," Leonberg explains. "You don't have to spend time convincing your audience that this is a hero they want to root for. They're like, 'Well, I'll die for him if I have to.'"

The hound in question is Leonberg's adorable eight-year-old retriever, Indy. When the director first had the idea of having his dog lead a haunted-house story, he filmed proof-of-concept shorts to figure out if it could work. "The first one was a shot-for-shot remake of Danny walking down the halls of the Overlook Hotel from *The Shining*," he says. When one of the shorts garnered Indy an acting award at a film festival, he knew he had his movie star.

The film follows Indy and his owner Todd (Shane Jensen), who moves into his grandfather's rickety countryside home following a health scare. Before long, the perceptive pup begins to see evil spirits. In reality, Indy was reacting to something else entirely. "Before mealtime, he'll just give you the most intense, blank stare ever," Leonberg laughs. "If you just do a shot/reverse shot of that intense stare and the thing he's looking at, it'll give the audience meaning."

**Top:** Retriever Indy — surely a shoo-in for the next Palm Dog. **Above:** Ruffing it in the forest.

Some scenes required a genuinely scared reaction from Indy, which meant Leonberg and his producer and wife Kari Fischer deploying unconventional tactics. This included using unfamiliar commands to confuse him. "If I shout, 'Neon sign!' at him, he'll go, like, 'What?'" the director says, tilting his head to imitate his dog.

Indy is not a trained show dog, which meant that production had to work around him. Filming stretched over 400 days to accommodate their amateur actor, whose unpredictable nature was both challenging and made for convincing spontaneous reactions. Yet despite the setbacks, the director is open to returning for more: "I feel like we have a treatment of what the sequel would be, whether it stars Indy or not." Whoever might follow has some big paw prints to fill. **IANA MURRAY**

***GOOD BOY* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 10**

# ON OUR MINDS

## DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE STRANGE BRAINS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

**BILL McCONKEY**

**JORDAN KING IS THINKING ABOUT...**
**BENEDICT WONG'S HOT DOGS**

Zach Cregger's *Weapons* offers plenty of food for thought — both figuratively and literally, the latter being Benedict Wong's seven-hot-dog platter. Now, I love a hot dog, truly I do. But seven? With carrot as a side and zero crispy onions? That's the movie's real tragedy, right there…

**BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT...**
**BIG MOVIE MOTORS PURCHASES**

I've spent too much time scrolling through the Klairmont Kollections Automotive Museum closing-down auction lately. Expect to see me in the Rubble Racer from the '94 *Flintstones* movie or a wonderful replica of the Mutt Cutts van from *Dumb & Dumber* on an A-road near you soon.

**JOHN NUGENT IS THINKING ABOUT...**
***ALIEN: EARTH'S ICE AGE* OBSESSION**

I really wasn't expecting the brooding new *Alien* series to make frequent references to *Ice Age: Continental Drift*. In fact, Sid The Sloth is a major plot point and emotional anchor for the show. What next — will the new *Predator* film feature a nod to *Alvin And The Chipmunks: The Squeakquel*?

Marco Vittur

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# How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

# Brett Goldstein

THE *ALL OF YOU* STAR LOVES NICHE CRISPS AND A GOOD MOVIE CRY

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

ARNO

**Do you have a signature dish?**
Cheese and ham omelette. I once heard Jamie Oliver will make people do an omelette as a test for them to be a chef, and I make such a good omelette that I've always thought I'd love to audition, get the job, and then he'd realise that I can't make anything else. (*Laughs*)

**When were you last naked outdoors?**
Probably in the sea at some point? I don't know the answer. I'm sorry. It's not me being shifty! I live in London so I don't have any outdoor space, so that might be the issue. The question should be: "When were you last outdoors?"

**Okay, when were you last outdoors?**
This morning. Picking up pints of milk at Sainsbury's.

**And how much is a pint of milk?**
It depends on where you go, and obviously it depends on the kind of milk. If you're doing whole milk, Sainsbury's, you're looking at 85p. But if you're going, like, soya milk or oat milk, you're in different territory. Then you probably got to double it at that point.

**What's your dairy-free preference?**
Oh, this one's mad. It's a new one. And it's really got me: cashew milk. Not as bad as it sounds. And I think you're looking at about £1.75 if you're on the cashew milk. Although now I'm thinking about it, that's for a two-pint bottle, so you're actually in the same territory.

**What's the worst job you've ever had?**
It was on a documentary film that never got finished. It was in Ireland, and I lived in a caravan, and I had to bike to this office in the rain, and I once fell off the bike and really hurt myself. I didn't know anyone at the office, and I didn't understand what my job was, but it was essentially logging the things that they'd shot. It was so depressing. At no point did I ever have a sense of accomplishment. I was just in a room looking at spreadsheets. I don't think I'm meant to work with spreadsheets.

**What film makes you cry?**
Most films make me cry. But the film of the last however many years that probably made me cry the most was *Saving Mr. Banks*. I had to, like, put a hoodie over my head to leave the cinema. I was in such a state.

**What's your favourite type of crisp?**
That's a great question. And it *changes*. Ten years ago, I'm thinking I'm going pickled onion Monster Munch. Do I still feel that way? I *might*... Or am I Nice 'N' Spicy Nik Naks?... I think I'm Nice 'N' Spicy Nik Naks!

**Who did you play in your first school play?**
Mrs Fox in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. I remember having a cardboard fox hat.

**Do you have an unusual hobby?**
I got into trying to do breath-holds underwater, because of that film about the free-divers. I got really obsessed with that. Three minutes, 53 seconds is my current record. I'm always scared to talk about it because it's incredibly dangerous and I wouldn't want to encourage it in any way.

**What's the worst smell in the world?**
I know it's meant to be good for you, but what's that stuff you're meant to do around your house, sage or something, to get rid of evil spirits? That gives me a headache. Which might be evil spirits.

**Who's your favourite member of the Fellowship Of The Ring?**
Uh... The, er, Sean Bean.

**And what's the character's name?**
(*Laughs*) Er, Randor? No, Creekor! Creekor's my favourite. Sean Bean. He's heroic, and he gets to leave the story fairly early on. He doesn't have to do so much walking.

**Which book have you read the most? Obviously not *The Lord Of The Rings*...**
It's *The Dice Man* [by Luke Rhinehart]. Aside from the concept of letting the dice choose things for you, I like the idea of him trying on different identities. This idea that we sort of choose an identity and stick with it, and then that's our boring lives. But for him there's all these millions of doors, and he can try a hundred things. I love that idea: that we do all contain multitudes, and sometimes you can actually explore that.

***ALL OF YOU* IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM SEPTEMBER 26**

# reviews

## FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

25 SEPTEMBER - 22 OCTOBER 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Man on a mission: Leonardo DiCaprio as freedom fighter Pat.

**Top to bottom:** Chase Infiniti as Pat's daughter Willa; The villain of the piece — Sean Penn's Colonel Lockjaw; Teyana Taylor as Willa's mum, Perfidia.

**WATCH FIRST**

Paul Thomas Anderson has said that the 1988 action-comedy *Midnight Run* inspired the film. "I've been dreaming of trying to make a film as fun as *Midnight Run* since I first saw it," he told *Esquire*.

FILM

# ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER

## PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON IN 'EXCELLENT MOVIE' SHOCKER

★★★★★

OUT **26 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **12A** / **161 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Paul Thomas Anderson
**CAST** Leonardo DiCaprio, Chase Infiniti, Sean Penn, Teyana Taylor, Regina Hall

**PLOT** After his freedom-fighting revolution goes awry, Pat (DiCaprio) and his daughter Willa (Infiniti) are pursued by the relentless Colonel Steven Lockjaw (Penn).

*ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER*, it's called, and it's no word of a lie. It begins with an attack — an announcement, an ambush — and then barely lets up at all. There is an opening half-hour of militant revolution, and then two hours of brutal, scrappy fallout, its central fugitive, Pat (Leonardo DiCaprio), lost in a weed fug amid kidnappings and breakouts and car chases and a *sensei* played by Benicio Del Toro. "This pussy ain't for fun. The guns is the fucking fun," says the firebrand fuelling the chaos, Perfidia Beverly Hills (Teyana Taylor, a Molotov cocktail in human form). For Paul Thomas Anderson, the filmmaking is the fucking fun. And never more so than here.

There is a *lot* going on, and not an ounce of fat on it. 'Inspired', as the credits inform us, by Thomas Pynchon's countercultural opus *Vineland* — or at least, bits of it — Anderson has cooked up his own take on the Great American Novel, a sweeping yet intimate epic filtered through a charged contemporary lens. Revolution. Immigration. Corruption. White supremacy. Basically: the absolute state of things. People with good intentions, people with bad intentions, all crashing against each other sexually, morally, violently. PTA has a lot to say — but never with a sledgehammer, never on a soapbox, and never to the detriment of entertainment. It's a blast from start to finish. And there are many blasts within.

A rogues' gallery of misfits and miscreants populate it. What a mess they make. Almost all of the characters here are — or at least ultimately become — hopelessly muddled. As we find them, they all have a clear sense of purpose. Or so it seems. Not for long. Power dynamics change. The world changes. *People* change. This is about battles big and small, macro and micro, political and familial. It's about rebellion and revolt, on the world stage and under our own roofs. It's about how life gets in the way of — or at the very least challenges — our ideals, our ethics, our principles. It's about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and the reality of that as time passes. It's about how none of us are as well-defined, or even as one-dimensional, as we might like to think. *Things change*.

All of this is presented through a clearly personal and, more significantly, humane perspective. Anderson has, he has said, been tinkering with this for the best part of two decades, and it's so sprawling, so ambitious and so expensive, maybe it wouldn't have been possible, at least for him, 20 years ago. But as both filmmaker and family man — specifically a father — it feels like everything he's done, and lived through, has evolved into this. You can sense his own experience throughout, bubbling and crackling in the celluloid. He's dealt with families and father figures before, of course, most notably in *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia* and *The Master*, but never as keenly and perhaps as sensitively as he does here. There is a purity here, and heartbreaking sweetness.

For the majority of the movie, DiCaprio's explosives expert Pat — once one of the figureheads of freedom-fighting revolutionary movement The French 75 — wants nothing more than for his daughter, Willa (Chase Infiniti), to be safe. Easier said than done with Sean Penn's outstandingly repellent Colonel Lockjaw on their tails. As such, DiCaprio provides a masterclass in panic and paranoia, ensconced in his dressing gown, engulfed in skunk smoke, but more arresting is his glassy-eyed, uncompromising love for his kid. You don't doubt it for a second. That relationship is the heart of the film, and Infiniti — in her first film credit — *is* that heart. She is a titan, squaring up to DiCaprio like she's been acting forever, countering that heart with unbridled piss and vinegar.

And then there is America itself, another recurring theme for Anderson who, with his reported $100 million-plus budget and his VistaVision cameras, shoots the shit out of it. One sequence in particular, involving a horribly tense, sinisterly mannered car-chase, unfolds on rolling desert roads, terrifying blind summits providing omniscient doom, front-and rear-mounted cameras taking us on a sort of haunted rollercoaster ride, the landscape itself signalling death. It's a real thrill, cinema absolutely harnessed. Everything is here.

**ALEX GODFREY**

**VERDICT** In years to come, when this appears on TV late at night, it'll be impossible to switch off. It's just one of those films. A stone-cold, instant classic.

Who will be the Tarmac Daddy?

FILM

# THE LONG WALK

## KING OF THE ROAD

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **108 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Francis Lawrence
**CAST** Cooper Hoffman, David Jonsson, Mark Hamill, Garrett Wareing, Charlie Plummer, Judy Greer, Ben Wang

**PLOT** In a totalitarian future, Garraty (Hoffman) is one of 50 teenagers taking part in a marathon trek. The winner will name his own prize; the other 49 will die.

BASED ON A NOVEL that Stephen King wrote in his freshman year at college before publishing it 12 years later, in 1979, under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman, *The Long Walk* has endured an aptly arduous journey to cinemas. George A. Romero and Frank Darabont are among the filmmakers who held the rights before dropping out of the race, and only now, as King turns 78, is the page-to-screen marathon complete. But boy, does Francis Lawrence prove a worthy winner.

No stranger to deadly dystopian contests, having directed the last four *Hunger Games* movies (and with a fifth, *The Hunger Games: Sunrise On The Reaping*, in production), Lawrence transposes the action from the author's home state of Maine, with its windy roads and verdant forests, to an unspecified territory (filmed in Manitoba, Canada) comprised of ceaseless flatlands. And so our young men, selected by ballot, walk for 350 miles along a rigid line of asphalt through endless fields under a huge sky. Heat scorches. Rain pummels. Cold nights stiffen the muscles. Pockets of gothic Americana (all those isolated churches!) only thicken the atmosphere of oppression. And any boy who receives a third warning for dropping below 3 mph is shot dead by soldiers.

"I'm proud o' y'boys!" growls the Major (an excellent Mark Hamill), never removing his impenetrable sunglasses. "Y'all got sack." But what happens when they cramp? Or blister? Or, brace for it, need to defecate? Well, just as the tournament is beamed live, 24/7, to millions of viewers, so Lawrence's camera never flinches. Screenwriter JT Mollner (responsible for ace serial-killer flick *Strange Darling*) has made some bold changes to the source material, but neither sanitises or dilutes. This horror-thriller, like the discipline it chronicles, is gruelling and grimly violent, with the punishment concentrated by the monotony of the terrain, and by the script's refusal to open out the action by cutting to more than the barest minimum of get-to-know-the-boys flashbacks. "WARNING!" cry the soldiers at every speed violation, and viewers would do well to listen: King wrote *The Long Walk* in the late '60s as an allegory for the Vietnam War; now, it feels no less bleak for tapping into the financial nihilism of our times.

And yet, from this road coated with the ashes of death rises a phoenix — or should that be mockingjay? — for many of the boys engage in banter, support one another in peril, and share unsentimental tales of their hardscrabble lives. Together they chant, "Fuck the Long Walk!" to the cameras in a fist-clenching, heart-swelling show of defiance. And Garraty and McVries (Cooper Hoffman and David Jonsson, both superb) strike up a deep, touching friendship. Forty-nine out of 50 might have to die, but the State will never kill the human spirit. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

**VERDICT** **The first of two King-as-Bachman 2025 thrillers featuring a deadly reality show in a dystopian future. Edgar Wright's *The Running Man* will need to bust a lung to keep up.**

## STEVE

★★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **TBC / 93 MINS**
**DIRECTOR** Tim Mielants
**CAST** Cillian Murphy, Little Simz, Tracey Ullman, Emily Watson

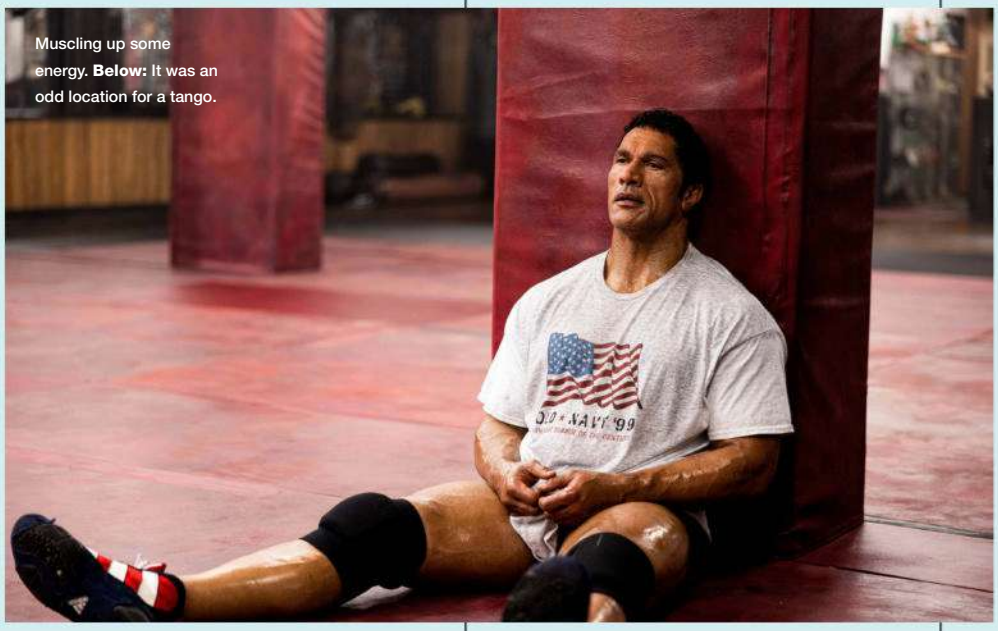
This is a gut-punch-packing adaptation of a novel by Max Porter, set in 1990s Britain. Cillian Murphy plays the frazzled headteacher of the title; over the course of a day, everything at the short-staffed reform school is at risk of falling apart. Arguments erupt, fights break out. Making an already frenzied day worse, a news crew arrive and Steve finds out the school's funding is under review. Thanks to Robrecht Heyvaert's disorienting cinematography, *Steve* evokes a visceral sense of things spiralling out of control. Some experimental shots go overboard, while Porter's elegant screenplay sacrifices some characters' interiority. But its sheer force of emotion — rage, defiance, unalloyed joy — make this cinematic dynamite. **MB**

## THE ROSES

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **105 MINS**
**DIRECTOR** Jay Roach
**CAST** Benedict Cumberbatch, Olivia Colman, Kate McKinnon, Andy Samberg

The original *The War Of The Roses* was a shock to the system; Jay Roach's remake comes with a different set of pressures. He has his work cut out to update its story and characters and make us feel any narrative tension as the marital tension ratchets skyward. Luckily, it's still funny. Couple Ivy (Olivia Colman) and Theo (Benedict Cumberbatch) have two romcom-friendly professions — chef and architect — but after a professional disaster, the marriage cannot quite recover. Perhaps because of Colman's innate warmth and Cumberbatch's ability to be self-deprecating, it's never as venomous as the original; not the toothless remake we feared, but there's an imbalance between the Roses that blunts some of its effect. **HOH**



Muscling up some energy. **Below:** It was an odd location for a tango.

FILM

# THE SMASHING MACHINE

### IF YOU SMEEEEELL WHY THE ROCK IS CRYING

★★★★

OUT **OCTOBER 3** / CERT **15** / **120 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Benny Safdie
**CAST** Dwayne Johnson, Emily Blunt, Ryan Bader

**PLOT** In the emerging UFC, Mark Kerr (Johnson) tries to overcome a devastating loss in the ring, with help from his girlfriend Dawn (Blunt) and friend Mark (Bader).

"WE, AS HUMANS, sometimes, we lose. What would that feel like?" This is the question put to Mark Kerr (Dwayne Johnson) by a Japanese journalist at the beginning of *The Smashing Machine*. At the time of the interview, the mixed martial artist is undefeated, and the concept of losing seems alien to him. Flummoxed, he doesn't have an answer.

The rest of the movie provides that answer. Set between 1997 and 2000, during the Ultimate Fighting Championship's wild pioneer years — when rules such as "no eye-gouging" were gradually introduced — it is a story of loss, and learning to lose. It begins with Kerr's first professional fight, and ends with him broken, rebuilt, and broken again, courtesy of an extraordinary performance from Johnson.

Johnson, too, has been learning how to lose. The world's most successful wrestler-turned-world's best-paid actor has taken some punches in recent years: *Baywatch* earned him a Razzie, while the hierarchy of power in the DC Universe did not, in fact, change with *Black Adam*. This film feels like a grandly artistic response to his recent career travails, Johnson acting like someone with something to prove, to show what he is capable of when not chasing box-office bottom lines. It

is, by some distance, the best work of his career. And that includes WWF SummerSlam 1998.

It is writer-director Benny Safdie (his first feature without his brother Josh) who shepherds him there. With a directing style less skittery than *Uncut Gems* or *Good Time*, while still retaining a naturalistic, indie sensibility, Safdie presents a deeply human portrait of a deeply contradictory figure. Kerr is powerful, violent, an opiate addict, but also boyish, gentle, polite. On a plane, he asks to see the sunset; at a fairground, he refuses to go on a ride because he has a dicky tummy, instead opting for a merry-go-round. "I just need you to treat me like a man," he complains to his girlfriend Dawn (Emily Blunt), after childishly smashing up a door, one of two he destroys in the film.

For her part, Dawn is volatile in her own way, though the dynamic between them is more interesting than her character itself. Blunt is as brilliant as ever, but even Safdie can't solve the problem of the worried-wife trope, sometimes sidelining her character to soapy outbursts. Occasionally it slips into genre hallmarks — Safdie can't resist a training montage — but with the help of Nala Sinephro's elegant, dreamy score (and a gut-punch Bruce Springsteen needle-drop), the film finds another path. This is more complex, sad and authentic than your usual sports-movie fairy tale; like *Raging Bull*, it finds simple, poetic beauty in the ring, and like *Rocky*, it finds failure meaningful.
**JOHN NUGENT**

**VERDICT** **As a newly solo director, Safdie summons a thoughtful and moving mood for this unconventional sports film; as a newly serious dramatic actor, Johnson is about to win some awards.**

Seeing eye to eye?

FILM

# AFTER THE HUNT

## A #METOO THRILLER WITH NO EASY ANSWERS

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **TBC** / **139 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Luca Guadagnino
**CAST** Julia Roberts, Ayo Edebiri, Andrew Garfield, Michael Stuhlbarg, Chloë Sevigny

**PLOT** After her colleague Hank (Garfield) is accused of sexual assault, philosophy professor Alma (Roberts) reckons with her complicity.

IS ANYONE BANGING out films with the speed and tenacity of Luca Guadagnino? The director seems to have given up sleeping, somehow squeezing in a trio of toxic, tempestuous love stories — *Bones And All*, *Challengers* and *Queer* — in about as many years. His latest certainly has some of the hallmarks of a Guadagnino joint (illicit passion, slippery morality, Michael Stuhlbarg stealing scenes). But at the same time, campus thriller *After The Hunt*, which seems to condemn both abuses of power and the excesses of efforts to expose them, feels colder, more cynical and subdued than his most recent films. It's absorbing thanks to some strong performances, but rather let down by a script that isn't as transgressive as it seems to think it is.

With its title cards imitating the unmistakable style of Woody Allen, the film wastes no time in announcing itself as a provocation. "It happened at Yale," we're told, and we're soon drawn into the rarefied milieu of eminent philosophy professor Alma Olsson (Julia Roberts). Likely to be given tenure at the university over her louche colleague Hank (Andrew Garfield), with whom she shares a strong attraction, she's doted on by husband Frederik (Stuhlbarg) and worshipped by her queer PhD student Maggie (a strong dramatic turn from Ayo Edebiri, styled to look like a miniature Alma). That million-dollar Julia Roberts smile doesn't make many appearances here; she's effortlessly commanding as this invulnerable intellectual titan repressing a traumatic past.

We first encounter Alma at the height of her power, hosting a booze-soaked soirée with her husband in their luxurious flat. Debut screenwriter Nora Garrett isn't one for burying the lede: there's a rant about affirmative action, Hank goads Maggie by lambasting her generation's fear of causing offence, and the professors blithely discuss the abhorrent political views and private lives of the canonical philosophers that they teach, from Heidegger's Nazism to Freud's misogyny. ICYMI, this film is about cancel culture.

Tension is high already thanks to a recurring ticking sound plus discordant clanging of percussion and blasts of brass detonated by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, excelling on scoring duty. But things intensify further when the next day Maggie confides in Alma that Hank sexually assaulted her after walking her home from the party. Alma's cold response and insistence on clarifying the precise nature of the attack leaves Maggie crushed, and all the more determined to pursue justice, while Alma spirals into a personal crisis.

In one of the film's most gripping and unsettling scenes, Hank and Alma have a clandestine meeting where he refutes the charges, claiming that Maggie has been plagiarising her thesis and that she's a mediocre student who's only at Yale through nepotism. Garfield is brilliantly loathsome here, devouring Indian food with faux affability and veering wildly from bitterness to charm to desperation.

### KEEP 'EM PEELED

'Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now' by The Smiths can be heard in a bar in one scene — a nod to the film's cancel-culture themes, given lead singer Morrissey's recent *persona non grata* status.

**Top to bottom:** Wine o'clock; PhD student Maggie (Ayo Edebiri); Bad romance: scurrilous academic Hank (Andrew Garfield) and professor Alma (Julia Roberts).

Here the film's central interest in unstable power dynamics comes to the fore — Maggie is a student and Hank is her teacher, but who wields more institutional influence with the university? Is Alma not advocating for Maggie akin to complicity with sexual violence? Has Maggie got Hank fired to secure Alma's tenure?

Even aesthetically this is no romanticised, Pinterest-board-worthy view of academia. Veteran cinematographer Malik Hassan Sayeed (in his first narrative feature in 27 years) creates effective and uninvitingly washed-out images, all concrete-grey and with the camera often at a wary distance. During the film's most heated moments, however, Guadagnino will cut to a tight, centrally framed close-up where the actors almost look directly into the lens, à la *The Silence Of The Lambs*, placing the audience directly within those confrontations.

An icy blonde with a penchant for men's tailoring can't help but be compared to Cate Blanchett in *TÁR*, and that film is certainly bolder by allowing its protagonist to be truly heinous. *After The Hunt* refuses to out-and-out condemn either Alma or Maggie and mercifully doesn't exonerate Hank either. This isn't so much of a he-said-she-said as a not-totally-successful post-#MeToo drama, the title seemingly alluding to detractors referring to the movement as a witch hunt. Its politics are certainly confused, and yet this is a pacy, elegantly crafted, engaging thriller with visual flair that's bolstered by Roberts' intriguing central performance. **LAURA VENNING**

**VERDICT** A decidedly grown-up thriller that will surely be torn to pieces by teens on TikTok, this feels like a slight wobble for Guadagnino, but is still a sharply entertaining and intense watch.

Old-school movie action. **Below:** Temperatures rise.

FILM

# THE LOST BUS

## PAUL GREENGRASS TAKES ON A REAL-LIFE INFERNO

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / CERT **TBC / 130 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Paul Greengrass
**CAST** Matthew McConaughey, America Ferrera, Yul Vazquez, Ashlie Atkinson

**PLOT** School-bus driver Kevin McKay (McConaughey) must deliver a bus full of elementary school kids to safety during California's deadly 2018 Camp Fire.

AFTER FIVE YEARS of stymied projects, Paul Greengrass has returned with something that should be right in his comfort zone: a fact-based drama set during a notorious disaster. It's character-based and non-sensationalised, and politically tinged in its approach to the world. But this isn't quite as sure-handed as usual, lingering on details that don't add to the story and underselling some that do.

The film initially feels almost retro in its slow build, with ominous establishing shots of the arid brush and the tense hum of James Newton Howard's score. You'd swear Greengrass was referencing *Volcano* or some other '90s disaster movie, making a monster out of the wind itself. But then he and his co-writer, Brad Ingelsby, spend the next 45 minutes lavishing time and attention on the sorry facts of school-bus driver Kevin McKay's (Matthew McConaughey) life, with a sick, bereaved mother and a teenage son who hates him (played, in a meta twist, by McConaughey's own mum and son). He's underperforming, unpopular and on the edge. If anything, it's too much time with the character; it begins to feel like misery piling on misery rather than the backstory to a story of heroism.

When a local wildfire builds from scattered sparks to raging inferno, McKay's time to shine

finally comes, despite his deep reluctance. He is sent to collect 22 kids and their teacher, America Ferrara's Mary Ludwig, for what should be a simple drop-off at the nearest evacuation point. But with everyone trying to flee town, the traffic is impassable, and they end up on a lengthy, dangerous route to safety, navigating small fires and the building smoke and heat. These scenes are genuinely thrilling and often terrifying to watch, especially with small children in peril.

Context for their situation is provided by the fire chief (Yul Vazquez) and his crew who are trying to manage the emergency back at a spot we can only assume is called Exposition HQ; those characters are all mere sketches and could have been filled out to better effect. They're essentially narrating something that is not really an action film; the most horrifying moments come when the bus is dead still.

McKay and Ludwig often can't do much more than try to keep the kids calm and inch through the smoke. The fire is everywhere and spreading faster than anyone can follow. It's a thorough rejection of the sort of bombast that would have followed in those '90s movies, the overblown heroism and posing, as Greengrass suggests that sometimes all we can do is try to survive, and help others do the same. It's an undeniable truth, but it does sometimes blunt the drama. **HELEN O'HARA**

**VERDICT** The fire scenes are terrifying and may well sear themselves into your brain, but however well-intentioned, the human element is less involving than the disaster they must endure.

"What's wrong with being sexy?"

FILM

# SPINAL TAP II: THE END CONTINUES

## GOODBYE, CLEVELAND!

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **84 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Rob Reiner
**CAST** Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, Kerry Godliman, Chris Addison, Rob Reiner

**PLOT** The estranged members of metal band Spinal Tap decide to reunite for one last gig, in the hope of securing their place in rock 'n' roll infamy.

"DIRECT FROM HELL... it's Spinal Tap!" This is how legendary mock-metal band Spinal Tap are introduced on stage in *Spinal Tap II: The End Continues*. It's a typically goth line from the band who have a song in their catalogue titled 'Christmas With The Devil' ("The elves are dressed in leather and the angels are in chains..."). But while it's not quite true to say that you could read a double meaning in that proclamation, this is not exactly a film that feels sent from heaven.

1984's *This Is Spinal Tap* is rightly lauded as a monumental work, and still one of the best big-screen comedies ever made, introducing us to one of England's loudest bands: David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean), Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) and Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer). Such is its brilliance that the crushing disappointment of this long-awaited follow-up hits particularly hard. It's as unfunny as the original was funny.

When we meet the band members again, they have gone their separate ways; Nigel now owns a cheese-and-guitar shop in Berwick-upon-Tweed ("I trust my hands more than a scale," he claims, one of the few truly authentic Tap-esque gags). Meanwhile, following the first film's "bizarre gardening accident", the role of drummer remains unfilled, in what amounts to less a running joke, more run-into-the-ground.

Rob Reiner, returning as both off-screen real director and on-screen fake director Marty DiBergi, obviously has an impeccable filmmaking pedigree, but his improv skills are not his strong suit. In one scene, he simply falls over some chairs, the kind of pratfall that Mr Bean might consider a bit much. While some jokes lack polish, others seem *too* contrived: a chopping board on the back of the guitar might be funny on the page, but lands like a thud on screen.

While the core trio are amiable enough company, the new supporting cast are wobbly. Kerry Godliman is solid as Hope Faith, the daughter of original manager Ian Faith, but Chris Addison's slimy publicist is a total misfire: while it cannot be doubted that the music industry is packed with amoral bastards, he is evil to cartoonish levels. Meanwhile, celebrity cameos from Paul McCartney and Elton John take the air out of any possible yuks, the filmmakers seemingly so enamoured with actual music legends that they entirely forget to give them anything funny to do.

Such absence of successful comedy is just heartbreaking. The only saving grace is that the band's musicianship is never in doubt, from their first a cappella together to full-throated renditions of classics like 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight'. Tap may have lost a bit of their mojo over the years, but their rock chops are at least still as loud as ever. **JOHN NUGENT**

**VERDICT** **This collection of tired jokes is enough to prompt the question, "What day did the Lord create *Spinal Tap II: The End Continues*, and couldn't he have rested on that day too?"**

FILM

## HONEY DON'T!

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **89 MINS**
**DIRECTOR** Ethan Coen
**CAST** Margaret Qualley, Aubrey Plaza, Chris Evans, Charlie Day

Did you hear the one about the red herrings in the desert? If not, director Ethan Coen and his co-writer Tricia Cooke would like to tell you all about it over 89 baffling minutes. The best reason this film has to exist is Margaret Qualley's Honey, a cool private-eye character in search of a compelling case. Instead, here she's called out to an apparent car crash in the desert by cop Marty (Charlie Day). From the stylish opening credits to the final shot, it looks and sounds great, but it's never quite funny or clever enough to get away with being so loosey-goosey in its approach. There are colourful characters and cool moments to keep you entertained on the road to nowhere, but they can't disguise the fact that this is a shaggy-dog story with no real point. **HOH**

FILM

## ON SWIFT HORSES

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **119 MINS**
**DIRECTOR** Daniel Minahan
**CAST** Daisy Edgar-Jones, Jacob Elordi, Will Poulter, Diego Calva

Based on Shannon Pufahl's 2019 novel of the same name, *On Swift Horses* has a lot going for it: the starry cast of über-popular young actors (Daisy Edgar-Jones, Jacob Elordi, Will Poulter), lush visuals, sweeping romance, a rich period setting. While it doesn't quite soar to the heights that combination might promise, it does deliver a textured, thoughtful drama examining queer love and repression in mid-century America. Edgar-Jones' Muriel is doing her best to avoid marrying her partner Lee (Poulter). When Lee's charming but unreliable brother (Elordi) visits, sparks fly between him and Muriel, setting off a journey of self-discovery. The filmmaking is a tad formulaic, but beautifully shot. **SB**

Training to be the GOAT?
**Below:** Red hulk.

FILM

# HIM

### A PSYCHOLOGICAL-SPORTS-BASED-HORROR-THRILLER (ANOTHER ONE)

★★★★

OUT **OCTOBER 3** / CERT **18** / **96 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Justin Tipping
**CAST** Marlon Wayans, Tyriq Withers, Julia Fox, Tim Heidecker, Jim Jefferies

**PLOT** Budding pro football player Cameron Cade (Withers) suffers a potentially career-ending attack. A training camp with legendary player Isaiah White (Wayans) is his one chance to keep the dream alive.

AS A DIRECTOR, Jordan Peele makes original, thematically complex horror (*Get Out, Us, Nope*). As a producer, on titles like *Candyman* and *Monkey Man*, he shepherds films that, while not always overtly horror, are unsettling, packed with big ideas and presented with visual dazzle. *Him* is about the loudest example yet, with a million thoughts, directed to within an inch of its life. It's a whole lotta movie. Sometimes almost too much, but never less than riveting.

Since childhood, when his dad shoved him firmly in that direction, Cameron 'Cam' Cade (Tyriq Withers) has wanted to play football. Not just play, but be the greatest of all time. Just when his big break seems inevitable, with a pick for the San Antonio Saviors, Cade is attacked, sustaining a brain injury. His future in jeopardy, but not yet ruined, he's sent to train with the Saviors' veteran star player, Isaiah White (Marlon Wayans). White's bootcamp is brutal, bloody and highly unorthodox. Cam, brain still healing, finds reality and nightmare blurring.

Director/co-writer Justin Tipping's previous film, 2016's *Kicks*, was a low-key, lightly surreal drama about a kid who thinks expensive sneakers will bring him the respect he craves, but finds attention can be dangerous. *Him* has

similar themes, with every dial turned way up. Cam believes football is his route to fame and becoming the man his father envisioned, but the price of idolatry is far greater than he imagines. And White is going to make him pay it. Practice sessions end in bloodied, broken faces. A doctor keeps sticking Cam with mysterious syringes. Horrifying visions stalk him.

Relative newcomer Withers (*I Know What You Did Last Summer*) makes a powerful impression in a role that requires him to convey a lot with little dialogue. The big moments go to Wayans, who's all-in as White, clearly relishing every second of the best role of his career. Julia Fox is wired fun as White's spooky girlfriend.

Tipping directs it all to the hilt — think early Darren Aronofsky meets Nike ad — with every frame minutely curated (Kira Kelly's cinematography is gorgeous), zippy visual tricks, and editing designed to be noticed. At times, the aesthetics can overpower the storytelling, the surface so slick the narrative won't stick, but this isn't just an exercise in style. It's teeming with ideas, about ambition, celebrity, race, power, ageing. If they don't all fully bloom, there are enough times when they do, thrillingly, particularly in the film's finale. This is the work of a director who has the potential for greatness. **OLLY RICHARDS**

**VERDICT** **A trippy mix of horror, thriller and sports movie, *Him* is a very wild ride. A launching pad for its director and lead, and a shining moment for Wayans.**

BOOKS

# THE GREENGRASS PAPERS

## THE PAUL IDENTITY

★★★★★

AUTHOR **TOM SHONE**

IN 2020, TOM Shone published *The Nolan Variations*, a fascinatingly unconventional spelunk through the mind and movies of a singular British filmmaker who made a very distinct mark on Hollywood. Now, with *The Greengrass Papers: A Film-Maker's Journey To Bourne And Back*, he's repeating the same trick with another idiosyncratic Brit-in-Tinseltown.

Style-wise, the works are twins, punctuated by topically freighted single-word chapter titles and characterised by sinuous tangents that at first have no apparent link to the director in question, but which eventually wind back to the movie-making narrative. However, despite the heavy presentational similarities, it's fair to say that, as filmographical subjects go, Nolan and Greengrass are thoroughly different creatures.

Where *Variations* was all mind games, Escher mazes and Shepard tones, *Papers* is a dog-eared collage of modern political and cultural-history snippets: a cork-board which threads string between The Rolling Stones, Watergate, 9/11, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, and more. What connects them all, of course, is Greengrass, a figure who's been long overdue the biographical treatment — surprising, given the sheer impact of his career.

When Shone's not off down his little side alleys, he moves propulsively through all the impressive Greengrass beats: shining a light on injustice via TV series *World In Action*; ghost-writing the epochal intelligence-service exposé *Spycatcher* and consequently earning the ire of the Thatcher government; shifting into hard-hitting yet full-of-heart docudrama gear with *The Murder Of Stephen Lawrence* and *Bloody Sunday*; redefining action-thriller cinema with his shakycam-masterpiece *Bourne* sequels; and finding a way to inject his docudrama verve into the studio-financed mainstream with difficult but compelling films like *United 93* and *July 22*.

Shone quotes liberally from his conversations with Greengrass, allowing the director's amiable voice and intellectual rigour to shine through as he frankly discusses both his triumphs and relative failures. Greengrass' key collaborators — researcher Michael Bronner, editor Chris Rouse, producer Greg Goodman, and Matt Damon — are given due prominence, while his few professional spats (not least with *Bourne* writer Tony Gilroy) are also explored.

No less valuable are Shone's own insights. Identifying Greengrass' compulsion to fill the gaps in our understanding of traumatic contemporary events, and his ongoing fascination with dramatically asymmetric conflicts, the author is an astute, articulate dot-connector. **DAN JOLIN**

**VERDICT** If you don't mind its numerous non-filmy diversions, ***The Greengrass Papers*** is a nourishing delve into a bold and innovative director who just wants to show, well, the world in action.

*Bourne* leaders: Matt Damon and Paul Greengrass walk and talk.

Alamy

### MARK KERMODE'S SURROUND SOUND

★★★★

AUTHORS **MARK KERMODE**, **JENNY NELSON**

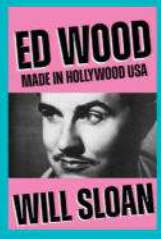
The tenth book from critic Mark Kermode is another witty and wise affair. Co-written with his former Scala Radio producer Jenny Nelson, it's an entertaining and assorted history of music and sound in cinema, weaving personal memoir (Kermode's skiffle band soundtracked a silent F.W. Murnau film at a Finnish film festival) with fascinating insight and trivia (German band Tangerine Dream nearly scored *The Exorcist*). **JN**

### THE BOOK OF SHEEN

★★

AUTHOR **CHARLIE SHEEN**

From '80s nepo-brat bad boy to ultra-dubious social-media sensation, Charlie Sheen is the very definition of problematic, narcotic-fuelled Hollywood excess. Better when he's talking films than all the grim sex-and-drugs stuff, his memoir is part confessional, part gonzo-style, self-aggrandising blah (whose tinges of irony and sentimentality don't quite convince) — ultimately less a mea culpa than a 'mea cooler'. In three words: sorry (not sorry). **DJ**




### ED WOOD: MADE IN HOLLYWOOD USA

★★★★

AUTHOR **WILL SLOAN**

For decades, cult filmmaker Edward D. Wood Jr has been something of a footnote in film history, a punchline of low-budget B-movies; his 1957 sci-fi *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is sometimes described as the worst film ever made. This new biography humanises the man, in a nicely balanced account that seeks to neither criticise his work nor condescendingly praise it. The definitive account of a true outsider artist. **IN**

Mike (Frank Dillane, centre) feels kinda blue.

FILM

# URCHIN

## IS THERE ANYTHING HARRIS DICKINSON CAN'T DO?

★★★★

OUT **OCTOBER 3** / CERT **TBC** / **99 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Harris Dickinson
**CAST** Frank Dillane, Megan Northam, Amr Waked, Harris Dickinson

**PLOT** After living on the streets of London for five years, Mike (Dillane) tries to turn his life around.

ACTORS MAKING THE transition to directing are a dime a dozen, but there's something special about *Urchin*, Harris Dickinson's feature debut. Sure, he's navigated his career so far with impeccable taste, working with the likes of Joanna Hogg and Steve McQueen, but as a filmmaker he's more than just a sponge for his collaborators — he's a fresh and original artist in his own right.

In the impersonal expanse of London, Dickinson finds a personal story. Mike (Frank Dillane) has been sleeping rough in any dark corner he can find for a number of years. When one unassuming stranger offers to buy him a sandwich, Mike mugs him and lands himself time behind bars. After his release, he's sober and takes up a cooking job at a budget hotel — but Mike's self-sabotaging tendencies prevent him from holding on to employment. At any gesture of sincere generosity, he retaliates.

Dickinson's taut screenplay finds pockets of levity in this slice-of-life story. For a moment, Mike seems almost comfortable: he slowly opens himself up to friendship at his cooking gig before singing Atomic Kitten at karaoke with his new pals. That temporary lightness only heightens the frustration of his inability to turn away from the chaos.

Mike's volatile behaviour is disheartening, especially when he appears just within touching-distance of stability — but Dickinson treats his protagonist with empathy and understanding. Destructive cycles are difficult to escape, and when a system of bureaucracy and austerity treats you like you're worthless for long enough, you may even begin to internalise that sentiment. Mike is as much a victim of odds stacked impossibly high as he is of his own impulses.

Dillane is outstanding in his first major starring turn, his character hiding behind bouts of charm — undoubtedly a protective mechanism for concealing Mike's inescapable pain. And in a part so distant from the magnetic leading men he's become known for, Dickinson also appears as Mike's twitchy friend Nathan, in a similarly tough situation.

With Dickinson and cinematographer Josée Deshaies keeping characters at a distance with observational wide shots, Mike appears lost precisely because he feels impossible to reach. And when *Urchin* is not wading knee-deep in the grand tradition of British social realism, the film cuts to surreal, visually hypnotic sequences — a cave, a church — that appear to dive into Mike's subconscious. The film refreshingly evades simple answers in that regard, forgoing pity in favour of illustrating the complex humanity of someone who's been made to believe they're not worth saving. **IANA MURRAY**

**VERDICT** **In tackling homelessness with deep empathy, one of our most exciting young actors proves himself to be a bold new voice in British filmmaking. Leave some talent for the rest of us, Dickinson.**

### WATCH FIRST

Harris Dickinson has cited *American Beauty* as one of the first films that made him think about the craft of filmmaking. (Its director, Sam Mendes, will be directing Dickinson in the upcoming Beatles films.)

GAMES

# TALES OF THE SHIRE

## A SECOND-BREAKFAST SIMULATOR

★★

**PC, PS5, NINTENDO SWITCH, XBOX SERIES X|S**

"I'm going on a non-adventure!"

FROM THE SAME Wētā Workshop so heavily involved in the *Lord Of The Rings* films, *Tales Of The Shire: A Lord Of The Rings Game* swaps Tolkien's epic conflicts for a cosy "life sim" in bucolic Bywater, set between the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings* proper. Hardcore Tolkien aficionados will bristle with grim foreknowledge since that's the same Bywater of the infamous 'Scouring of the Shire', doomed to be overrun and utterly despoiled by Saruman. That puts quite the damper on your genteel efforts to grow organic produce and host dinners with your neighbours.

Or it would, if that factored into *Tales Of The Shire* at all. Instead, playing as a custom Hobbit — designed to your tastes in a passable-if-uninspiring character-creator — you're newly transplanted from Bree, with little greater ambition than making friends with the locals. Bywater's biggest ruction on your arrival is a disagreement on whether it's a town or a village.

Structurally, most of what's on offer here feels a lot like a *Story Of Seasons* game, just dressed up in Tolkien drag. No sooner have you entered Bywater than you're palling around, helping out Orlo the postman or the herbalist Delphi, growing crops, catching fish, and generally sprucing the place up. You inherit your own Hobbit hole, which you'll be able to revamp to increasingly exacting standards, but at the start you can't even get in the front door — an early sign of problems to come. Much of *Tales Of The Shire* feels like a slog, with moments where it feels like the developers abandoned ideas halfway through: a fishing mini-game is rote (Pull in the opposite direction to the fish! Don't snap your line!), while gathering mushrooms, nuts and other ingredients rapidly gets annoying.

On balance, that might all make for a middlingly cosy game: one that probably wouldn't win over *Stardew Valley* fans but might be entertaining enough for *LOTR* obsessives keen to spend some time with the Brandybucks. Unfortunately, *Tales Of The Shire* feels borderline unfinished. Not only is there no spoken dialogue, there's not even placeholder audio, meaning all your interactions feel flat. Of course, that's when you can even interact with villagers at all — most of the time, you can't speak with them as you're exploring. A gestures tool, allowing you to wave or express emotion, feels especially pointless.

Then there are the countless bugs. Some objects at times fail to load, while certain actions force the restart of the entire game, which also sometimes simply grinds to a halt as you wander around Bywater. It's hard to comprehend how something with this sort of aesthetic, all cartoonish character designs, unchallenging textures and watercolour palettes, can end up with such a disappointing result. **MATT KAMEN**

**VERDICT** **With little in the way of emotional depth, this is overly twee village life, filled with repetitive tasks and lacking polish. A Bag End bust.**

### MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

★★★

**PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S**

The latest *Mafia* game's setting — Sicily in 1904 — might be last century, but its gameplay is decidedly last decade. Shoot-outs feel like pop-up galleries and the narrative is incredibly linear. Nevertheless, this throwback *Mafia* proves oddly enjoyable, and its tight focus means the game doesn't outstay its welcome. It's not quite criminally good, but *The Old Country* will doubtlessly steal a few hearts. **MK**

### SHINOBI: ART OF VENGEANCE

★★★★

**NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S**

Sega's classic action series gets an upgrade, pitting master ninja Joe Musashi against the evil ENE Corporation. Combat is superb, Musashi fluidly leaping around the screen and dispatching foes with swords, *shuriken* and supernatural skills, while *Metroid*-style exploration rewards backtracking when new abilities are unlocked. Boss fights can get tough, though, dampening its appeal. **MK**

### SWORD OF THE SEA

★★★★

**PC, PS5**

Kickflipping down sand dunes and chaining grind combos isn't exactly what you expect from Giant Squid, a studio more known for calm, meditative adventures like *ABZÛ*. Now, it takes its style of serenity and pairs it with extreme sports. As a lone wanderer surfing the desert on a hover-sword, you carve across dunes, restore water to a desert world and pull off some gnarly tricks along the way. The result is a game that truly soars. **HS**

Domhnall Gleeson's Ned gets motivational. **Below:** Cheeky. **Bottom:** Not on the same page.

TV

# THE PAPER

## PRINT MEDIA IS ALIVE AND WELL, WE PROMISE YOU

★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY/NOW)** / EPISODES WATCHED **10 OF 10**

**SHOWRUNNERS** Greg Daniels, Michael Koman
**CAST** Domhnall Gleeson, Sabrina Impacciatore, Tim Key, Chelsea Frei, Oscar Nuñez

**PLOT** The documentary crew behind *The Office* begin to follow the employees of a new workplace: the ramshackle team running local Ohio newspaper *The Toledo Truth Teller*.

THE AMERICAN REMAKE of *The Office* was something of a miracle. Stateside reboots of UK shows rarely make it past the first season (see *The IT Crowd, The Inbetweeners, Skins*). *The Office* 2.0 not only ran for nine seasons but gained enough slow-burning popularity to now launch its own spin-off, sharing just a few threads of connective tissue and that same shaky, side-glance-to-the-camera mockumentary format.

It's a tough act to follow a show that had such a unique lifespan, and to its credit, *The Paper* doesn't lean too heavily upon its legacy. Co-created by *The Office*'s Greg Daniels, the premise has more thrust than its predecessor: the print edition of Ohio newspaper *The Toledo Truth Teller* is on its last legs and its partner website a near-unreadable trough of clickbait fodder. Enter a peppy new editor-in-chief, Ned Sampson (Domhnall Gleeson), who is hired to salvage the publication. Maybe it's no coincidence the character's name sounds similar to that of a certain *Simpsons* neighbourino; all that's missing is the moustache from this upbeat leader, who uses a typewriter and believes that elbow grease and integrity will shepherd the paper into a new era.

If you're looking for an eye-wateringly cringey David Brent or manchild Michael Scott in Ned, you won't find one. In fact, the only direct character replication you'll encounter in *The Paper* is Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nuñez), who actually was in *The Office*, and whose disdain for the documentary team's return makes for the first big laugh of the series. The surrounding characters are slightly drawn yet sweet enough, with the exception of two villains: Tim Key's besuited bigwig Ken and Sabrina Impacciatore's (*The White Lotus*) website editor Esmeralda.

Of the cast, Impacciatore is given the most room to colour outside the lines, albeit while bordering on caricature with her brightly painted talons and theatrics. Key is confined to the 'stuffy Brit' box but manages to slip in a few feral shrieks and some great physical comedy. And Gleeson is unwaveringly endearing, especially when rallying the troops, who are at their strongest when ricocheting off each other in livelier scenes.

Those moments, alas, don't come often enough, and between those flashes of creative gusto *The Paper* lacks energy. Of course, this is the HQ of a small-league paper: hardly Watergate-breaking stuff. But *The Office*'s dreary Dunder Mifflin housed characters that people invested in en masse. For now, *The Paper*'s collective ensemble doesn't feel there yet. Like its sister show, it may need a first-pancake season to hit its stride and deepen the connection with its characters. Here's hoping for another miracle. **BETH WEBB**

**VERDICT** ***The Paper*** **has forged an enjoyable path and gleans power from Gleeson's chipper charm, but has yet to find its voice as a standalone sitcom.**

Fucking good.

FILM

# I SWEAR

## FOUR STARS FOR A FILM WITH MANY FOUR-LETTER WORDS

★★★★

OUT **10 OCTOBER** / CERT **TBC** / **120 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Kirk Jones
**CAST** Robert Aramayo, Maxine Peake, Shirley Henderson, Peter Mullan, Scott Ellis Watson

**PLOT** John Davidson (Aramayo) lives with Tourette syndrome, for which he is ostracised — until he meets kindly Dottie (Peake).

AS FAR AS cosy, feel-good British films go, *I Swear* begins in irreverent form. As John Davidson (Robert Aramayo) lines up to receive his MBE from Queen Elizabeth II, his nerves get the better of him. "Fuck the Queen!" he blurts out. It's a deliciously iconoclastic moment, and one that serves both sides of this delightful film's two wolves: the warm-and-fuzzy teatime template that it appears to follow, and the involuntarily foul-mouthed subject that it tracks.

Directed by Kirk Jones (whose cosy feel-good credentials include 1998's *Waking Ned*), *I Swear* tells the true story of a Scottish man living with Tourette syndrome, at a time when public awareness of the condition was virtually nonexistent. After that royal run-in, the story flashes back to 1983, where we meet John as a young boy (played superbly by Scott Ellis Watson). He is happy and popular, the star goalkeeper at school, and like any self-respecting Scottish boy eats chips twice a day. When involuntary tics start to creep into his voice and mannerisms, though, his life starts to unravel.

His parents are immediately dismissive. John's cold-as-winter mother (Shirley Henderson) simply prescribes "a hot bath and an early night". By the time we meet John as an adult, now played by *Rings Of Power*'s Aramayo, he is treated like a second-class citizen. It is only when he meets Dottie (Maxine Peake), the mother of a friend and a mental-health nurse brimming with gentle warmth and kindness, that life becomes tolerable.

Lovable underdogs are a staple of British cinema, and *I Swear* doesn't stray too far from the well-trodden path, but its occasional clichés are forgiven for a few reasons. For one, the cast are uniformly excellent: Aramayo in particular puts in an extraordinary performance, achieving not just the technical feat of playing someone with such a specific physical and vocal condition, but also nailing the emotional pathos, the likeable everyman, the sly humour.

That is another of the film's strengths: it is very, very funny. Without ever punching down, it recognises the inherent absurdity of John's swearest tics — given extra oomph in a Scottish accent. It's fair to say this is the cosiest mum-and-dad-friendly film to feature dialogue like, "Show me your knockers!" and, "I'm a paedophile!"

Most impressively, though, this is a film which does justice to those living with Tourette's, honouring without judging, celebrating without condescending. The final act marks John's activism, using real-life Tourette's actors; in perhaps the film's best scene, he shares a car with a young girl struggling with the condition. After a minute or so of hurling the unholiest insults at each other, the pair smile quietly together, finding some solidarity. Like the film at large, it's sweet, funny, and unusually moving. **JOHN NUGENT**

**KILLER QUOTE**

"It's not going well, Tommy. He called the judge a cunt."
DOTTIE (MAXINE PEAKE)

**VERDICT** Just lovely. Tourette syndrome has not been afforded its cinematic dues, but what an affable, funny character to explore it with in John Davidson — and what a performance from Robert Aramayo.

A tall drink of water.
**Below:** The look of love.

FILM

# ROOFMAN

## CHANNING TATUM CAN QUOTE YOU FOR GUTTERING REPAIRS

★★★★

OUT **17 OCTOBER** / CERT **TBC** / **126 MINS**

**DIRECTOR** Derek Cianfrance
**CAST** Channing Tatum, Kirsten Dunst, Peter Dinklage, LaKeith Stanfield, Juno Temple

**PLOT** After robbing multiple branches of McDonald's by breaking in through the roof, Jeffrey Manchester (Channing Tatum) escapes prison and hides in a Toys R Us store.

STRANGER THAN FICTION. That's the phrase that springs to mind when thinking of the true story behind Derek Cianfrance's *Roofman* — that of army veteran Jeffrey Manchester (played by Channing Tatum), who committed a spree of robberies through the late '90s and early '00s by hacking into the roofs of over 40 McDonald's restaurants, went to prison, escaped by stowing under a truck, and hid in a North Carolina Toys R Us store for months. An unbelievable crime caper with a compelling central character, it provides fertile ground for a gritty but heartfelt big-screen adventure.

Manchester's idiosyncrasies make you warm to him straightaway: introducing himself to the McDonald's staff by bellowing, "Good morning, team!"; offering them his coat as he locks them in the freezer; bouncing on trampolines in a pink feather boa to evade the police. He feels like a real one-of-a-kind person, struggling to behave and assimilate after serving his country, but a genius when it comes to observing details that allow him to commit his crimes. Even in his most unethical moments, you're never not on Jeffrey's side. His motivations around providing for his family feel a bit too neatly packaged at the start, but are given depth as the script explores Jeffrey's insecurities and compulsive generosity.

Tatum is remarkable as the reluctant robber, channelling his leading-man energy and boundless charisma whilst remaining goofy and childlike. This role, despite all the peanut M&Ms thievery and Spider-Man bedding, feels like the star reaching a new level of maturity and restraint, effortlessly walking the line between comedy and tragedy. The lovely but doomed romance between Jeffrey and Kirsten Dunst's warm, newly divorced mum Leigh is pure magic. The pair have a calm, easygoing chemistry that feels incredibly real; Jeffrey occasionally looks at Leigh with such wonder in his eyes, you'll have butterflies.

The Toys R Us shenanigans are the main sell here, and there are plenty to enjoy — Jeffrey rolling around the store on Heelys, using baby monitors to spy on the staff, getting caught in the buff by Peter Dinklage's gloriously obnoxious store manager Mitch — but *Roofman* goes deeper than that. Cianfrance brings all the intimacy and raw humanity seen in his previous works *Blue Valentine* and *The Place Beyond The Pines* to an altogether more humorous and outlandish tale, with the 35mm film and wistful, old-school score keeping every unexpected plot turn grounded in emotion and truth. Just like Toys R Us kid Jeffrey doesn't want to grow up, you won't want his unique quest for freedom to end. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

**VERDICT** **Derek Cianfrance delivers a hugely empathetic, very entertaining depiction of an extraordinary life, featuring one of Channing Tatum's best performances. Expect laughs, tears, and noughties nostalgia.**

# also out

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### THE CONJURING: LAST RITES
★★★ FILM
"Perhaps because this film was conceived as a victory lap, director Michael Chaves lavishes time and attention on everything but the plot. This film is comfortably over two hours, and it's a full 75 minutes before the Warrens even enter the haunted house." **HELEN O'HARA**

### EENIE MEANIE
★★★★ FILM
"There's a ton of vigour to this piece. It's an action-comedy with more than a whiff of Shane Black to it, some action reminiscent of Edgar Wright, and the morbid, chatterbox humour of Quentin Tarantino." **JOHN NUGENT**

### HOSTAGE
★★★ TV
"Silly and rather slight, this is the rare Netflix show that doesn't outstay its welcome. A solid binge for viewers who like their thrillers lean, entertaining, and somewhat vacuous." **DAVID OPIE**

### GOOD BOY
★★★★ FILM
"Teased out over a three-year period, Indy's lead (heh) performance must rank as one of the greatest animal turns of recent times. It certainly throws that CGI-concocted Krypto into the shade." **DAN JOLIN**

### KPOP DEMON HUNTERS
★★★★ FILM
"There are, of course, some elements of predictability. But when the songs uplift and the animation excels, these minor flaws can be forgiven, for a film that deserves every bit of its global domination." **KELECHI EHENULO**

# RETURN

**WITCHES AND WIZARDS AND SEQUELS, OH MY! THE FIRST FILM SHOOK UP THE BOX OFFICE LIKE A CYCLONE — AND WICKED: FOR GOOD AIMS TO GO DEEPER AND DARKER. GET READY TO FLY, MY PRETTIES...**

# TO OZ

WORDS
**HELEN O'HARA**

"Oh. My. God," *Wicked* director Jon M. Chu shakes his head. "I have so many pictures of yellow bricks. Different hues. How warm or cool or textured; how the bricks are lined up. Are they staggered? How big are the bricks? Are the bricks indented? What's the grout? Is the grout yellow? Is it a different yellow? How much dirt can you get on the yellow brick road? If it was a real road, there would be dirt, but you don't want the yellow brick road to have dirt on it. Does it have an edge? Does it have a curve? We debated every single question for many, many weeks. It was a daunting task."

Everything about his adaptation of the musical *Wicked* has been similarly involved. The prequel to *The Wizard Of Oz* tells the story of its principal witches — Cynthia Erivo's green-skinned Elphaba and Ariana Grande's none-more-blonde Glinda — and spans years. Early on, Chu made the decision to split it in two, almost doubling the stage-show's length. "When it was one movie, we were cutting songs and cutting plot points, and you're just like, 'This isn't *Wicked* anymore,'" he remembers. "The moment we broke it, we could do the work to make sure that each one had the guts and the meat and the intention to justify it. It was going back to the basics, following the characters and understanding where they shift."

With two films, they could lavish time on a cast full of triple threats and develop characters who are perhaps underserved on stage. Both films were shot together, but if the first weren't a hit, they'd have sunk a vast production budget and enormous effort on sets and shooting into a sequel that no-one wanted and that would be, to put it in Ozian terms, hideoteous.

Happily, *Wicked* Part One *was* a runaway success late last year, following one of those press tours that not only raises awareness of the film but becomes part of the culture.

**Clockwise from main:** Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo); Director Jon M. Chu with Ariana Grande and Erivo; Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh) gets horrible; The Wizard (Jeff Goldblum); Fiyero (Jonathan Bailey).

Online there was no escaping *Wicked*, or Erivo and Grande. Their fashion, friendship and high emotion were everywhere; the phrase "holding space" entered the zeitgeist thanks to a question in one interview about the effect of the film's musical finale, 'Defying Gravity', on the queer community. "It felt special to me, and I hoped people would feel the way I feel when they saw it, but I don't think I could have prepared myself for just how insane it became," says Erivo, speaking to *Empire* from her home in London, where a tattoo artist is waiting to add some new ink when we're done. "It took its own form in the world. It was like being in the middle of a whirlwind." Or, given the subject matter, perhaps a tornado.

"Very grateful to have been there for that," beams Grande later. "[The tour] was just such a carbonating experience. There was so much appreciation and love for *Wicked*, it was keeping us afloat."

This time, however, the sky-high expectations that met the last film have now been elevated to a whole other dimension. For all the (hard-earned) confidence of its team, can *For Good* live up to them?

It's been a long old yellow brick road to get here — not even counting the 21 years since a film adaptation was first mooted. Chu was a father of two when he took the job in February 2021; he's now a father of five ("None of them twins, by the way!"). His youngest was born on the day of *Wicked* Part One's Los Angeles premiere, adding to his euphoria at that global launch.

That first film saw Erivo's outcast Elphaba meet Grande's popular Glinda (initially Galinda) at university, and go from reluctant roommates to devoted friends. Along the way, both became romantically interested in Jonathan Bailey's Prince Fiyero, while Elphaba involved herself in the cause of Oz's talking animals, who were losing their power of speech following a long campaign of persecution. In the end, Elphaba was cruelly disillusioned when she discovered that her hero, the Wizard (Jeff Goldblum), was behind the attacks, along with her mentor, Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh). She flew off — defying gravity, if you will — into an uncertain future to find a way to stop them. Glinda, still wedded to the system, stayed behind.

In *For Good*, we return to Oz some years later, to find Elphaba comprehensively demonised and Glinda held up, by the Wizard and Morrible and their propaganda machine, as her equal and opposite number. On the outside, it's everything Glinda ever wanted. But Grande sees turmoil inside her bubble — both her metaphorical one and the literal one she uses to travel around Oz.

"I think she is a little bit lost in the sauce at the beginning of this film," says Grande, speaking to *Empire* from New York during a day off from filming *Meet The Parents* fourquel *Focker In-Law* in New York. "She's enjoying her position and the idea of providing goodness for people, but deep down she is really struggling, because it's not what she's envisioned for Oz. Things aren't how she knows they could be, and it's hard for her to stomach that — let alone the loss of her best friend."

Elphaba is also at sea, as Erivo explains. "She has to question why she wants to continue to save Oz, or save the animals in it, even though this place doesn't necessarily want her." She restates her purpose in a new song that has been written for this film by the show's original composer Stephen Schwartz, called 'No Place Like Home'. "It is a discovery as to why she can continue," she says. "That is where the story gets started for her. I was really aware that if the words 'no place like home' are in her mouth, they have to mean something. It has to be really special."

The song is sung — like Part One's 'I'm Not That Girl' — essentially to herself, letting the audience in on Elphaba's thoughts at a time when she feels entirely isolated from everyone around her. This was "the power of the musical" for Chu, the unique ability to completely access a character's head at a moment when there was no-one to talk to and no-one to trust. Elphaba has always been an outsider, ostracised for her green skin and serious manner, but she's never been so entirely alone as now, when even the talking animals she's been fighting for have mostly lost the ability to speak. But she can communicate her struggle through song — and expressing herself through music connects her "spiritually", says Chu, to Grande's Glinda, even when they're far apart.

They're together because Glinda's new song, 'Girl In The Bubble', also comes at a moment when she's entirely alone and isolated, and lets the audience see that she's no bubblehead. "We get to see [Glinda] decide, 'I'm going to change the course of Oz. I'm going to become deeply, truly good and make a safe space for people,'" says Grande, "She earns her title for real, and we get to see that self-discovery. I'm so grateful for that song, because she deserves it as a character."

Grande is politely adamant that Glinda is "deeply good" and always has been — but this is the film where the flighty, sometimes thoughtless girl we saw before comes into her own. "It's traumatic event after traumatic event after traumatic event, and they're all shaping her and propelling her into her actual goodness, that has quietly been there all along, but she wasn't ready for it yet. Even in the first film you get to see ›

those layers slowly peeling away, but in this film, it's rapid and urgent. It goes even deeper than imaginable."

The Elphaba-Glinda relationship is, then, kept at the heart of the story even when they're apart: two sides of the Ozian coin. "It's the girls, stupid," became Chu's mantra after he dissected the power of the show and tried to figure out where he needed to focus. It all comes down to that pairing. "There's no real endgame for friendship: no wedding, no baby. The test for friendship is the darkness, the fight, the saving each other, and it explores all these things. Friendship often has to end in our lives, but it doesn't devalue the moment." It's also an under-explored topic on screen, especially friendship among women. Aside from *Thelma & Louise* — a frequent reference point for Chu — it's buddy cops all the way down.

"I think sometimes we underestimate how powerful friendships can be," says Erivo. "Often when we see women on screen together, they're adversaries, and rarely do you see women in the centre of a film being friends. I think sometimes people find it hard to believe that people have really good relationships as friends, so sometimes it becomes warped or sexualised. With this, what was really beautiful is that I think people started to go with us. We started seeing people look at their own friendships and say who's Glinda and who's Elphaba, and do they switch from time to time, and how they can be better friends."

That power all depended on Erivo and Grande — the latter of whom had insisted on multiple auditions and studied acting for months to prepare for the role, determined to prove that she wasn't just there because she's a huge pop star and the seventh-most-followed person on Instagram. And the pairing worked: Grande got her first Oscar nomination and Erivo her third. Chu still seems near awestruck with admiration for the two stars, as performers and as people. "They both have lived; they're not new starlets from nowhere," he explains. "They have a talent that everybody wants. They have been chased, revered, ridiculed, and they have survived. In this movie, they feel the power of that journey. If you thought they were good in movie one, movie two is where they bloom."

That said, he did also have to consider a love story this time — something that he was "suspicious" of in the show. If it's all about the two girls, after all, who needs an outside romance? But as so often happens in real life, romantic love can throw a spanner into friendships. The dashing Fiyero is publicly to be seen on Glinda's arm, but he and Elphaba have a near wordless connection, a sense that something is wrong in the world. "You meet him very quietly spinning out of control, really, in a state of quiet rebellion,"

**Clockwise from main:** The Wizard turns on the charm for Elphaba and Glinda (Grande); Glinda spreads the magic; The witches have words; Ready for a song; Madame Morrible makes her feelings known.

says Bailey of his character. The actor's busy packing for a cycling holiday and occasionally frowns at the two panniers he must cram everything into ("linen and Lycra, the two Ls"), but continues. "[Fiyero's] passively going along with an establishment that he doesn't believe in, and he's using his position as head of the guard to find Elphaba, seemingly to protect Oz. But as we know, I think, from the first film, he really wants to be close to her."

With both films shot and *For Good* largely edited before the release of Part One, Chu only had to do a couple of days of pick-ups in January to fine-tune some key scenes. "They're really important," says Erivo. "Because he's so brilliant, there were very few pick-ups to do, but I'm so glad we did them; they thread in so beautifully." Also threaded in: the original story of *The Wizard Of Oz*, which parallels and criss-crosses this film's plot, creating a whole new list of ways to potentially disgruntle acolytes.

If Part One was a trial by fire before a jury of musical fans, *For Good* finds itself standing before 85 years of cinema history, waiting for judgment from everyone who ever loved the 1939 MGM film. The bad news is that, as the recent furore over the Las Vegas Sphere's digitally altered version shows, the fans can be passionate in their criticism. The upside is that this film has even richer *Wizard Of Oz* iconography to draw from: Dorothy's house will crash in Munchkinland this time and set several characters on a collision course. As fans of the musical know, we have already met Dorothy's travelling companions (remember that traumatised lion cub, for example?), but the girl herself will be more a presence than a character: glimpsed from a distance or from behind. "I think that's such a wonderful thing to do," says Erivo, ›

# OZ GOES POP

## THE WIZARD'S CULTURAL IMPRINT GOES WAY OVER THE RAINBOW

### CINEMA

**WILD AT HEART** (1990)

Full of allusions to the 1939 film, David Lynch's love of Oz reaches its zenith when rogue Sailor Ripley (Nicolas Cage) is beaten up by thugs and visualises Glinda The Good Witch (Sheryl Lee, above) telling him, "Don't turn your back on love, Sailor." Sadly no munchkins talk backwards.

### TV

**AGATHA ALL ALONG** (2024)

In 'Death's Hand In Mine', titular witch Agatha Harkness (Kathryn Hahn) transforms into the emerald-faced Wicked Witch during the trial on the Witches' Road. This is another work stuffed with affectionate nods to Oz. Oh, and *Hocus Pocus*.

### MUSIC

**ELDORADO** (1974)

The fourth studio LP of the Electric Light Orchestra (ELO) is a concept album boasting a cover image of Dorothy's ruby slippers. The album traces a Walter Mitty-like character using dreams and fantasies to escape a mundane world, aka Birmingham.

### GAMING

**WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE** (2007)

A possible encounter in the MMORPG's Opera Hall event features an *Oz* skit involving characters called Dorothee, Strawman, Roar, Tinhead and The Crone (shades of *The Simpsons'* 'The Shinning'). There's no place like your mum's basement.

IAN FREER

"because then everyone gets to keep the Dorothy that they know."

It was special for Grande too, who used to dress up in Dorothy's gingham dress as a child with, for some reason, a Jason Voorhees mask. "It worked," she claims, with Glinda-like certainty. "If you were there, it made sense."

Her Glinda's relationship to the young Kansan even has a tiny touch of Jason about it. "I love the little bit of shadiness that Glinda has towards Dorothy," laughs Grande. "There's a lot going on, and she doesn't really have time to deal with this. She could have told her to take the Emerald City train! But she didn't. That's a little shady, Glinda! So I leaned all the way into Glinda sort of having an eye roll for Dorothy whenever she has to deal with her."

It's not only Dorothy, of course: we see the tragic backstory of both the Tin Man and the Scarecrow who accompany her, and learn why they warn her against witches. Magic, in Oz, doesn't always work quite as intended, and is not always benign. But at least it should look spectacular, drawing in the elements of the world to create extraordinary results. "I was coming in and out, and seeing the designs, it's extraordinary," marvels Bailey. "The big idea is about nature and being discerning about everything you see [on set]. So with the Tin Man, it's all the cutlery and beautiful ornate silverware in the room, it comes together; and with Scarecrow it's like burlap and the straw on the ground." All sounds rather nostalgic and heartwarming, right? Don't be so sure.

These scenes of magical transformation are not only a homage to the 1939 original, but also to the tradition of Universal monster movies for Chu, who wanted something "fun" and "pulp" without losing the darkness in the moment. In fact, there's a lot of darkness in this second half. Sections of the populace are being demonised: literal goats are being made scapegoats. Communities are displaced to make way for progress, in the shape of the road; inhuman and inhumane armed forces roam the land. Other, more insidious forces prey on the lonely and isolated, turning them towards hate. Oz is barely a metaphor for the real world anymore; it's just 2025.

"People love to hate together," Chu agrees. "It's crazy how relevant some of this stuff has got, but that's not because we tried to make it something. These are timeless stories of how people act."

That's not to say that there's no puppet master behind it all. You might be thinking of the obvious candidate, Jeff Goldblum's Wonderful Wizard Of Oz, and he certainly has a part to play.

"He's a person of maybe cheesy showbusiness foundations," says Goldblum, looking exceptionally dapper at home in LA. "He comes to Oz, and is unexpectedly gifted with esteem. And he doesn't set the record

**Clockwise from main:** A dramatic silhouette; Elphaba kicks ass with her broom; Fiyero and Glinda have a moment; The Wizard channels his inner ringmaster; Fiyero and Elphaba have concerns.

straight. That's the gateway to his betrayal of a good character. He wants more status. Not power! Real power is being able to tell the truth, do lovely things and raise people up. I genuinely believe that. But he likes this position that he's enjoying and he does some very bad things."

However, the Wizard is not alone in this — and the way he reacts minute-to-minute to the strange developments of this magical land suggests that he's less of a strategist and more of a patsy. "If you don't have a burning mission statement here, in this life of ours, even in this fable life, you can fall astray like Pinocchio," agrees Goldblum. "You can go with the bad kids, and get into Candy Land, you know? Just accidentally, without a big plan. Maybe Madame Morrible is more of a bedevilled strategist, you know? Yeah, I think that's how it can happen."

So is Morrible the truly wicked one here? *Empire* catches up with Michelle Yeoh as she holidays on a yacht in the south of France (sadly, we're virtual) to ask about the character, once a teacher and mentor to both girls. "Morrible is the true mastermind, the true manipulator, in all of this," Yeoh admits. "But I think she also truly believes that this is what Oz needs. She created the Wizard; like, 'Our people need this illusion.' But she also creates a sense of fear, because nothing reacts better than fear."

Fear and friendship, love and hate. It's a lot for anyone to orchestrate. Chu had to draw on everything he'd ever learned in his career to bring it all together. The physical self-expression of dance he took from *Step Up 2: The Streets*. The importance of lyrics as well as music from *In The Heights*. The storytelling through action of *G.I. Joe*, and everything he thinks he got right and wrong there (having to execute some of that film's particularly explosive action was overwhelming, he admits). Let alone his work with big-name casts on *Now You See Me 2* and *Crazy Rich Asians*.

"Jon is one of those guys who's always prepared," says Yeoh, who worked with him on the latter. "He's the captain, always steady. The storm is coming but he's ready." He spent hours sitting with each cast member, discussing their approach, and endless weeks with his heads of department figuring out sets, costumes, lighting and schedules for the film duology. But he also focused in on the details: Erivo recalls a week when she had to call in sick, when her director sent tom yum soup with a note assuring her that it had no garlic or onion, which she hates. Bailey, who dislikes lengthy feedback on set, occasionally got a compliment by text. "He has a gorgeously precise plan," says Grande, "and the playfulness of an improv show."

It was a perpetual effort of balancing exacting detail — introducing hints of Fiyero's signature blue to Erivo's costume at a certain point, or figuring out how composer John Powell would employ the show's themes — and being ready for spontaneity. That applied even to some of the film's biggest moments. The titular song, 'For Good', was shot as weather cover when rain stopped outdoor shooting. "It was a long series of shoot days," says Grande. "I just remember at that point really not being sure where Glinda ended and I began. Those were such devastating days, but beautiful."

If you're one of the *Wicked* fans who has yet to make it through a karaoke rendition of 'For Good' without choking up, you're not alone. "Us neither," smiles Erivo. "I can tell you that for sure. We were sobbing most of the time. It was really hard, and we just had to figure out how to move through it and sing through the tears and let that emotion be what it was, because otherwise we would never make it. We sobbed, too."

Those scenes, about halfway through the shoot, were a throwback to the first day that Chu and his stars gathered before production, along with composer Stephen Schwartz. They had dinner, and chatted, and Schwartz sat down at the piano to demonstrate what he'd been working on for the show's new tunes. Then Erivo and Grande sang, though not before Chu went and got his children out of bed to witness a moment of history ("You're sitting on my lap and you're listening to this!"). With no preparation, they duetted on 'For Good', and Chu realised that he was onto something special. "Like, holy shit!" he says now. "I'm incredibly lucky."

A bit of luck is at play, maybe. But as the first film proved, this team boasts more than its fair share of brains, hearts and courage. And now they're hoping to seal the deal. For good.

*WICKED: FOR GOOD* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 21

# GOING ALL IN

AFTER LAST YEAR'S TRIUMPHANT *CONCLAVE*, EDWARD BERGER IS BETTING BIG WITH GAMBLING SAGA BALLAD OF A SMALL PLAYER. *EMPIRE* SPEAKS TO THE DIRECTOR AND HIS CAST ABOUT CAUSING CHAOS IN THE CASINOS OF MACAU

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

> "GAMBLING IS THE *ONE* ADDICTION THAT NEVER REALLY GOT ME."

Colin Farrell shoots *Empire* a wry grin and continues: "In my younger years, I'd go to Vegas and spend three hours at a blackjack table, but that was more to do with the booze being free for as long as you were sitting there. So, I never got the gambling thing. But with any addiction — gambling, drinking, shopping, fucking — the roots are the same. It's a spiritual malady."

Lord Doyle — Farrell's character in *Ballad Of A Small Player* — represents spiritual malady in human form. An embezzler on the run from the UK, Doyle is hiding out in the mega-casinos of Macau, across the harbour from Hong Kong, posing as an aristocrat while frittering away his stolen cash at the baccarat tables, holding out desperately for that One Big Win. In Buddhist cosmology, there is a dimension called the 'realm of hungry ghosts', populated by cursed creatures with huge bellies and tiny mouths, unable to ever satisfy their craving. This is where Doyle exists. "We often look in the wrong places to find contentment — myself included," says Farrell. "And Doyle is an abject example of that."

The film allowed Farrell to push new boundaries and face new challenges — from mining darker moments of his past to mastering an upper-class English accent and binge-eating an entire buffet (more on all those later). For director Edward Berger, too, *Ballad* was an opportunity to slip the leash and let loose. After the star-making one-two punch of his Oscar-winning *All Quiet On The Western Front* and last year's critically adored papal drama *Conclave*, *Ballad* allows Berger to go "*totally* over the top", he says with a chuckle. "To create an operatic explosion of the senses. In some ways, [*Ballad*] is a reaction to *Conclave* being so serene, mathematical and austere," Berger adds. "For this film, I wanted to go *crazy*. Like Doyle is crazy. Like Macau is crazy."

What happens, then, when a piping-hot director and his stellar leading man decide to run riot and test their limits in one of the maddest places on Earth? As *Empire* discovers — all bets are off.

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EDWARD BERGER WAS FRESH FROM grappling with another tale of addiction, wealth and chaos when Lord Doyle first came his way.

It was 2018, and Berger's TV miniseries *Patrick Melrose* — starring Benedict Cumberbatch as a moneyed Englishman battling heroin abuse — had just aired, impressing all who saw it, including British producer Mike Goodridge. "Mike was running the Macau Film Festival," Berger recalls. "He told me Macau was a very interesting, exotic place — and he had [the film rights to] a book set there."

The Swiss-German director took a look at Lawrence Osborne's 2014 novel *The Ballad Of A Small Player* and was instantly on board. "It was a gut thing," he says. "I loved this idea of someone reinventing themself in a completely new world. There was humour and drama, light and dark, quiet and loud."

Writer Rowan Joffé was hired to pen a screenplay, untangling the novel's Joycean stream-of-consciousness, and adding — in Berger's words — "a more tangible threat of discovery" for its fugitive protagonist. The movie cooked away on a low heat for a few years while Berger made *All Quiet* and *Conclave*, but when the director bumped into Colin Farrell on the awards circuit in 2022, he knew he'd found his Lord Doyle. "Colin has this deep humanity and vulnerability," Berger says. "In the book, Doyle is more aloof. But Colin's inherent earnestness creates this empathy. That was the decisive factor for why he had to play this role. The character goes crazy and does despicable things — but I wanted people to empathise with him."

For his part, Farrell didn't need much persuading. "I fucking *banged* through the script, man," he enthuses. "There was this sense of propulsion: emotional and psychological. [Doyle] is so loud, so desperate, so cocky, so fearful. There's a whole life lived, damaged, broken and learned from in 90 minutes." He liked the script so much, in fact, that he didn't even read the book. "I was aware that the script and book were very different beasts," he says.

**Above:** 'Lord' Doyle (Colin Farrell) meets his match in the Crystal Tipps-inspired Cynthia (Tilda Swinton).
**Below:** No deal!

**Above:** The plush — but deadly serious — environs of a Macau super-casino. **Left:** Director Edward Berger on set with Fala Chen, who plays Dao Ming.

"And I trusted Ed's intuition completely."

Part of the reason script and book were so different was Joffé's introduction of a brand-new character — investigator Cynthia Blythe, who is tracking Doyle to recover his stolen cash, and represents that "threat of discovery" Berger mentioned. "She's there for schematic reasons, but also to give Doyle a sense of 'home'," explains the woman who plays her, Tilda Swinton. "She comes from the same background — grey, provincial towns — and she's genuinely touched by Doyle's subterfuge and reinvention. She has this 'unlived' life, and she notices Doyle's yellow gloves and monogrammed shirts and it rings some bell inside her." For Cynthia's frizzy-haired look, Swinton drew from the unlikely duo of Queen Elizabeth I and Crystal Tipps from forgotten '70s cartoon *Crystal Tipps And Alistair*. "What can I say?" she shrugs. "Crystal is an icon."

Swinton and Farrell had worked together once before, on Tim Roth's 1999 drama *The War Zone*, when Farrell was making his feature-film debut and Swinton had just given birth to twins. "The first time I met Tilda, she was feeding one child on her right breast and the other on her left," Farrell recalls. "What a perfect introduction to such a force of fucking nature as that woman." The obvious fondness the actors feel for one another fed into their second film. "There's a quiet love story between Doyle and Cynthia which wasn't there in the script," Berger notes. "That's Colin and Tilda's interpretation."

Another of the film's "quiet love stories" takes place between Doyle and Dao Ming (played by Chinese-American actress Fala Chen): a casino loan-shark who initially feeds the faux-Lord's addiction, before attempting to rescue him from the 'realm of hungry ghosts'. "It's rare in Western cinema to have an Asian woman not just waiting for a white guy to save her," laughs Chen. "Here, it's the other way round. Dao Ming has been hustling all her life, and in Doyle she sees another lost soul. Ed gave me so much freedom [with the character]. I saw courage in her. Someone who — like Doyle — is looking for redemption."

If its performers helped imbue the film with lightness, love and hope, however, *Ballad*'s more potent dark side was entirely generated by the brain-melting bombast of its location.

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FOR FARRELL, IT'S "A PURGATORIAL PLACE — grotesque but beautiful, too".

For Swinton: "a fever dream. I can't believe anyone would take drugs there, because the whole place is like a hallucinogen." For Berger, the province of Macau — the most densely populated region on Earth, home to a gambling industry significantly larger than that of Las Vegas — recalls a quote from the American artist Bruce Nauman. "[Nauman] said he wanted to make art that 'hit you in the face with a baseball bat'," Berger smiles. "That's what Macau is to me. The humidity, the torrential rain, the ›

lights, the fountains, the over-the-topness: it's like being hit in the face with a bat."

*Empire* can very much confirm all of the above. Visiting the *Ballad* production in July 2024, we find a region that effectively contains two different planets side-by-side. On the one hand, there's 'Old Macau' — the historic centre — boasting colonial Portuguese architecture and 15th-century Taoist temples. On the other, there's Cotai — a new sector built on land reclaimed from the sea, housing what Berger calls "the windowless, air-conditioned nightmare" of the towering hotel-casinos. As *Empire* wanders through the plush, velvet-lined lobby of *Ballad*'s principal location — the five-star Wynn Palace Macau — we witness a 20-foot, jewel-encrusted Fabergé egg rise from a trapdoor in the floor. It opens slowly to 'hatch' a gigantic phoenix made from freshly cut flowers. "Fever dream" is an understatement.

"It's this place of extreme abundance and luxury, but it leaves you feeling utterly *empty*," Berger laughs. "You'd see people in the elevators with plastic bags full of money and they'd bump you out the way like you didn't exist. The complete disregard of people driven only by greed. It was the experience of living in Macau that shaped this film into a comment on capitalism spun out of control."

Farrell observed this spin cycle up close. "The [casino] manager showed me a 'high-roller room'," he tells us, referencing the ludicrously decadent suites gifted exclusively to mega-spending gamblers. "There's a button you press that opens a 'secret door' to a karaoke room." He shakes his head. "It's all so fucking puerile, man. The manager said there'd been two gentlemen in the night before, and they'd lost *24 million* Hong Kong dollars [£2.3 million] in *four* hours. I said, 'Did they have fun, at least?' He said, 'No, no. They're miserable. They come in angry, they leave angry. Whether they win or lose.' You can tell it's this itch that can just never be scratched."

The scene *Empire* witnesses on set sees Doyle desperately attempting to soothe said

**Top to bottom:** Waiting for that One Big Win; Loan-shark-turned-potential saviour Dao Ming; Esteemed British thesp Alex Jennings joins the table as Adrian; Investigator Cynthia has Doyle in her sights.

Alamy

unscratchable itch. At a baccarat table set up on a soundstage inside Cotai's MGM Theatre, Farrell is immaculately turned out as the pretend-lord, sporting a blood-red jacket, pencil moustache and Doyle's lucky, mustard-coloured gloves ("Where's my lovely yellow gloves?" Farrell enquires genially, before cameras roll. "I'm fucked without them"). As Berger calls "Action!", Farrell settles down at the table beside Swinton's flustered-looking Cynthia, telling her — in a cut-glass English accent — "to watch as I turn this 500 [dollars] into 10,000". "I've shit the bed in a few films, trying an English accent," Farrell laughs, later. "I always feel like Dick Van Dyke with a fucking broom." (*Empire* can confirm he nails his first-ever 'received pronunciation' effort here.)

As the take progresses, Doyle's luck holds — he draws a 'natural 9' (the highest hand in baccarat), attracting admiring glances from Cynthia and a flock of excited extras, who begin chanting and stroking his shoulders in the hope his luck will rub off on them. "Luck is serious business in China," Swinton explains. "It's not fanciful or whimsical — it has a practical place in the culture."

As *Empire* wanders the casino between takes, we experience this first-hand. A table will explode noisily as someone wins big, and dozens of gamblers will sprint across, laying their hands on the winner and throwing their chips down, in the hope the latest 'lucky table' might reward them, too. We're even told by one punter that it's considered bad luck to play against a pregnant dealer, as you're effectively facing two opponents, not one. "I love the romance of that stuff," Farrell chuckles. "You see players calling the spirits; blowing the cards, hoping to change the numbers on them. It's very deep to them. Very real."

"Very real" was the objective on set. Shooting took place in mostly real locations — the Wynn's luxury suites and casino floors — often at the risk of the crew being booted out mid-take. "We shot in a high-roller room," Berger recalls. "But [the casino] told us that if a high-roller showed up, we'd be out. Immediately. Because these people can spend $5 million a night. So we knew our shooting schedule could be ruined at any moment."

Luckily, no high-rollers rolled up. Indeed, Berger even managed one particularly outlandish sequence — Doyle being chased across a still-active casino floor — without any interference from the real gamblers. "No-one blinked an eye," laughs Farrell. "Clearly, 25 years of acting has done fuck all for me in China."

Another stand-out scene sees Doyle take the 'hungry ghost' comparison literally by feverishly scarfing an entire hotel buffet. "That was fucking rough," Farrell admits. "I was genuinely sick that day (*he had come down with a fever*), and I had to eat *a lot*. But [the scene] was a great way to show the desperate emptiness of addiction: this hunger that can never be sated. Because you only get roped into addiction if it *works* at first. But that cruel turning-point always comes when the demon stares into your face and says, 'I'm here to tell you it *doesn't* actually work — and now you can't stop.'"

Farrell drew on his own past struggles with substance abuse to tap into Doyle's demons. "The story is about the power of reinvention," he says. "In a cheesy way, I could apply that to myself, talking about sobriety. But there are many ways to reinvent yourself. Doyle comes to Macau looking for redemption. But ultimately he ends up in Hell." For Farrell, the devil was in the detail.

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IF *BALLAD* OFFERS FARRELL ONE OF HIS gnarliest, meatiest, most challenging roles yet, it also allows Berger to increase his current standing as one of the most exciting dramatic filmmakers around.

The director is, as Farrell notes, "a fucking *engine*. I get concerned about the amount of work he's doing. I'm like, 'When are you gonna take a break?'" Clearly, Berger isn't hankering to slow down. After winning the Oscar for Best International Feature with *All Quiet* in 2023, and the BAFTA for Best Film with last year's *Conclave*, the filmmaker is ferociously blazing his own trail through the cinematic landscape, switching genres at every turn. "It's good that they're all quite different," he says of his recent films. "You want to burst new boundaries each time. But if you look closely, there are similarities. *All Quiet*, *Conclave* and *Ballad* are all stories told from a singular perspective, about people looking for liberation. A small haven of peace."

His next film, *The Riders* — entering pre-production this autumn — explores similar themes, too. It stars Brad Pitt as, in Berger's words, "a very masculine guy who goes in search of his wife, and finds his masculinity falls apart on the journey". Another "singular perspective" Berger is being linked to is Jason Bourne's, with the action franchise currently in reboot phase after being bought by NBCUniversal. "That's all in the stars," Berger says of directing a *Bourne* outing. "I'd love to do it, but it depends on the script — whether we can find something for Matt Damon to play that he hasn't before, and something that I don't feel Paul Greengrass or the other directors have done. [*Bourne*] has *such* a legacy. You don't want to make a film where people say, 'Ah, it's not as good as the others.' There are many hurdles."

Undoubtedly so — but Berger seems like a filmmaker who relishes taking hurdles in his stride. "He's so passionate about the work," says Farrell of his director. "It really does *consume* him." Berger smiles at the assessment: "Making movies is never easy," he shrugs. "It takes all your focus. But the biggest challenge is always: what next? Why *this* story *now*?" So far he's been rising to those challenges impeccably. Long may the winning streak continue.

***BALLAD OF A SMALL PLAYER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 17 AND ON NETFLIX FROM OCTOBER 29**

## RAISING THE STAKES

### MOVIE BETS FROM SMALL TO BIG

**TRADING PLACES (1983)**

**THE WINNINGS: $1**

Minted brothers Randolph (Ralph Bellamy) and Mortimer (Don Ameche) wager a measly dollar they can reverse the fortunes of street hustler Valentine (Eddie Murphy) and Wall Streeter Winthorpe (Dan Aykroyd). Sounds like a reality show waiting to be commissioned.

**MAVERICK (1994)**

**THE WINNINGS: $500,000**

In the late 1800s American West, gambler Bret Maverick (Mel Gibson) works his way into a do-or-die power game on the steamboat Lauren Belle, and wins big. The twist is, any cheaters and losers are thrown overboard. That never happens on Bet365.com.

**CASINO ROYALE (2006)**

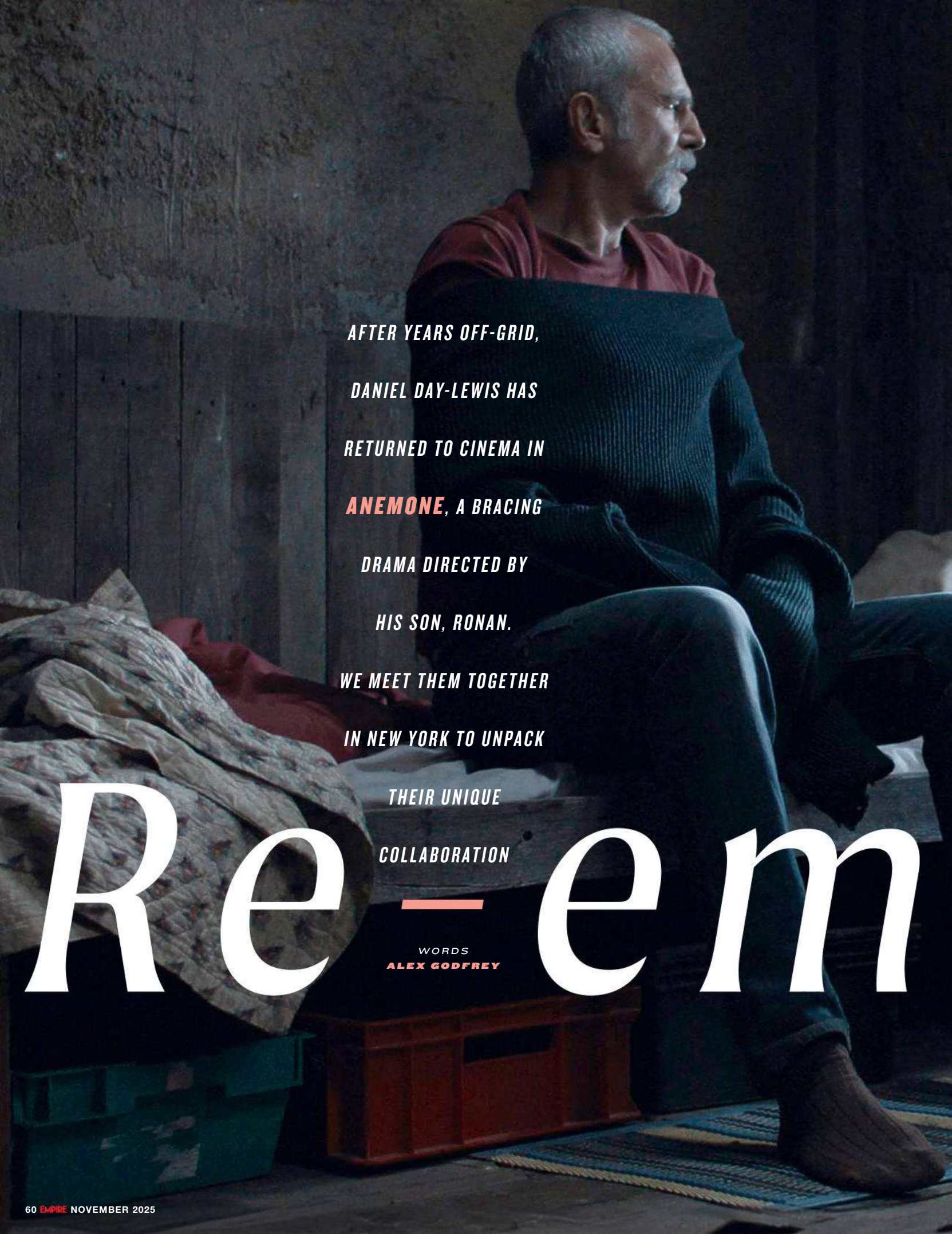
**THE WINNINGS: $115 MILLION**

After losing his initial stake and drinking a poisoned martini, Bond (Daniel Craig) beats terrorist Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen) at poker with a straight flush. Le Chiffre retaliates by whacking him in the nads with an old rope.

**STAR WARS: EPISODE I — THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999)**

**THE WINNINGS: THE FUTURE DARTH VADER**

Bartering with Middle-Eastern stereotype Watto, Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) wagers his starship for a hyperdrive and the freedom of slave Anakin (Jake Lloyd) on the outcome of a podrace. Why he doesn't just twat him with a lightsaber remains a mystery. **IAN FREER**



# Re-em

AFTER YEARS OFF-GRID, DANIEL DAY-LEWIS HAS RETURNED TO CINEMA IN **ANEMONE**, A BRACING DRAMA DIRECTED BY HIS SON, RONAN. WE MEET THEM TOGETHER IN NEW YORK TO UNPACK THEIR UNIQUE COLLABORATION

WORDS
**ALEX GODFREY**

# erging

# DANIEL DAY-LEWIS HAS BEEN AWAY.

*Empire* is in Manhattan's unfeasibly illustrious Hotel Chelsea with the 68-year-old and his 27-year-old artist son Ronan, and we remark on how nice it is to be doing this in the flesh. "Yeah, I missed that whole transition into not meeting anymore," says Day-Lewis Sr, who requested this conversation be face-to-face. It's been eight years since he announced that he would no longer be acting, and in his absence, the film industry has had its ups and downs, as has the world, taking in a pandemic which heralded, well, more video interviews than we were previously accustomed to. Yet here we are, and here he is too: nothing less than a living legend, having returned to the fold with a thoroughly family endeavour.

Family is everything to Day-Lewis. You can see it on his body, the outlines of his sons' hands tattooed up his own arms. Family is everything in the extremely intense *Anemone*, Ronan's debut film, which they wrote together, and which swirls — tumultuously — around Daniel's snarling, unforgiving hermit Ray Stoker, living in a cabin in a wood, visited out of the blue by his brother Jem (Sean Bean), who lives with Ray's ex-partner Nessa (Samantha Morton) and Ray's son Brian (Sam Bottomley), who has never met him. And family is everything here in Manhattan, where Daniel and Ronan (who both live nearby) spend an hour with *Empire* discussing the film, and their relationship. Throughout, Daniel is utterly engaged with Ronan, hanging on his every word. Throughout, they complete each other's thoughts, and sentences.

The actor has worked with a litany of great directors, pumping out a slew of classics, and winning three Best Actor Oscars. Clearly, though, the experience he just had making a film with his son is more meaningful than any of *that*. "I mean, how can it not be?" he smiles. The love radiates from both of them.

**What does it feel like, doing an interview together?**
**Daniel Day-Lewis**: Well, it takes the curse off it (*laughs*). And it feels very natural, because from the first notion that we ever had which led us to this, we've done everything together. So it's nice to keep going with that.

**It's interesting to consider how your own relationship informed this film. Ronan, you spent quite a lot of time as you were growing up on your dad's productions. What was that like?**
**Ronan:** It was amazing. I was so lucky to be taken to these places. We were in [Canada's] Prince Edward Island when they were shooting [Daniel's wife and Ronan's mother, Rebecca Miller's] *The Ballad Of Jack And Rose* [2005], which was such a formative experience for me. Just seeing that set be built and come to life. I was so young, I didn't really understand what was happening, but seeing that world being created was so intoxicating.
**Daniel:** [Ronan's younger brother] Cashel was still a baby, he took his first steps, actually, on the island. I was working with the construction crew at that time, helping to build the house and some furniture for it. We built everything. [His character] Jack's house would have been built by Jack, so we created a kind of deserted commune there, and one functional house. So Ronan's first experience would have been the building of the place. And a little while later, I think at school, somebody asked Ro what his father did and he said, "I think he's in construction." (*Laughs*)
**Ronan:** And then *There Will Be Blood* [2007], living in Marfa, Texas, for a couple months was amazing. (*To Daniel*) I remember, one time, you were shooting a scene where your character just comes in and says, "Good afternoon," and that was the first time I'd actually seen you working on set, in real time.

**Were you in London for *Phantom Thread*?**
**Ronan:** I came to visit. And by that point, I was obsessed with filmmaking, and was just in awe of being able to actually watch this process unfold. To be like a ghost, wandering around and kind of eavesdropping on different departments.
**Daniel:** It got hard. For the first few years, when the boys were young enough [Rebecca and I] just travelled with them, and if we were working together, that took care of that. Otherwise, only one of us would work at any given time, but as they got older it got harder to do that. I mean, I found it *really* hard later on. Not that it happened that often, but being away again for long periods of time got difficult when we could no longer do that. ›

**Clockwise from main:** Daniel Day-Lewis on set with his son, director Ronan; Ray Stoker (Day-Lewis); With brother Jem (Sean Bean).

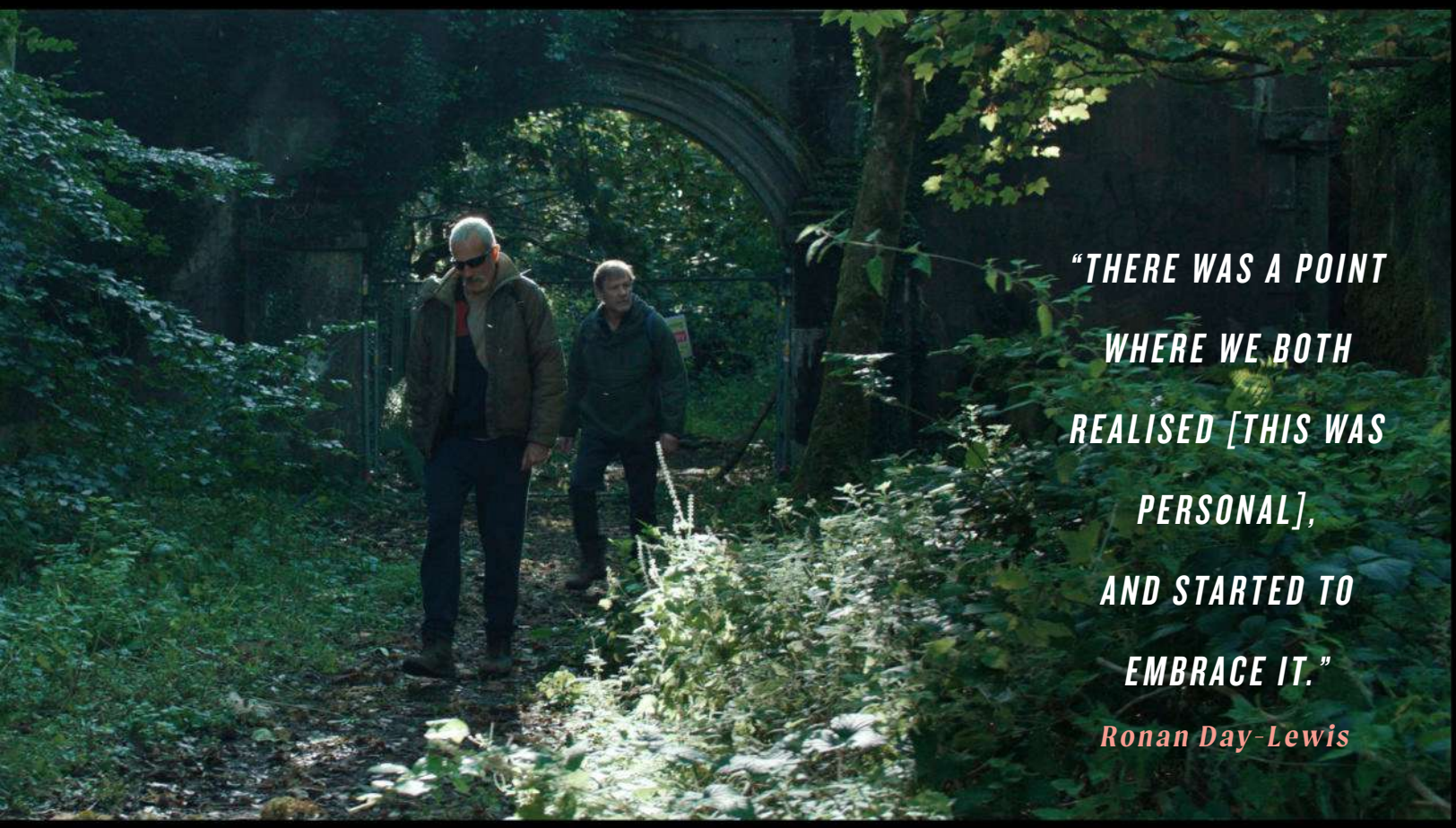
**Is that one of the reasons why you stopped acting?**
**Daniel:** It may well have contributed to just a growing sense that... The work was never less than fascinating to me, but the world around it, probably including that, and mostly to do with the public aspect of that kind of life that I'd never really got used to since when I first started, that question-mark had always weighed fairly heavily on me — was I suited for that way of life? And I struggle with it, because I love the work so much, and it felt for a long time as if that was just part of the cycle. And I could accept it on those terms, but yeah, it just got harder. It got harder.

**When people retire, they spend more time with their family. So it seems that, ironically, for you, work grew from that situation and you got pulled back in again. Is that what happened?**
**Daniel:** Well, one thing I would say is that I never felt that I'd retired. That's a word that's been used. I *never* felt that I retired, I just stopped doing *this* work because I wanted to work at something else for a period of time. It never occurred to me to retire. I mean, I *wouldn't* ever retire, I hope. But the odd thing is, necessarily, we were all together as a group during the Covid period, and that's when we started writing [*Anemone*]. Ronan was about to do the equivalent of his final exams at university, his final thesis was a show of work. And so we brought all his materials back to the house, set up a studio, and we were all together. Cashel was about to finish high school and was about to go to university, and at the same time *I* went back to school, in Boston.

**To study what?**
**Daniel:** I studied violin-making, at a really extraordinary school which is not well known [North Bennet Street School]. It's one of the great treasures in this country, which teaches handcrafts, various different things. Anyway, Cashel went to Ohio and Ronan was working as a painter in Brooklyn. We still saw a lot of each other.

**How did you decide to start writing together?**
**Ronan:** I had had this idea about brothers, about the beauty and tragedy of that kind of relationship, for a while, and then it turned out that that my dad, separately, had his own fascination with brotherhood, and about doing a project that touched on that. So at a certain point after the... I don't want to say "retirement", but after you [Daniel] decided to stop for the time being... My dad came to me and said that he would love to try to find something for us to work on.
**Daniel:** It was a residual sadness. Knowing that Ro was going to go on to make films... Over the years, since Ronan was tiny, we've done things together, made stuff together. And I had a sort of anticipatory regret that I wouldn't get to work with Ronan as a filmmaker. So we just thought we'd try and cook something up. We felt that we could probably keep it contained; I guess we were kidding ourselves to some extent. I didn't expect it to become something that would require such a substantial production because, you know, the whole paraphernalia of filmmaking... I wasn't falling over myself to get back into that, but I just really wanted to work with Ro.
**Ronan:** Yeah, we just started bouncing ideas back and forth in a very low-pressure kind of way, and then we landed on this idea of brotherhood, and specifically this idea of a man that's living in this state of self-banishment.
**Daniel:** An estrangement, like a long-term estrangement.
**Ronan:** We didn't go in with any kind of outline. And it ended up becoming more character-led.
**Daniel:** Ronan has had an incredible facility with typing from an early age, so he was doing the writing. He's got very fast fingers. And we were improvising. We were all the characters, and refining it as we went.

**That's interesting, because Daniel, you've previously spent months, sometimes years, getting into character for other people's scripts. How was the process different seeing that you were writing it? As you became your own creation?**
**Daniel:** Yes, that's a very good question. It undoubtedly... I think it oiled the wheels a good bit. There were things I still needed to learn. I knew quite a lot about the Troubles already (*Ray is a former British soldier who fought against the IRA*). I'd explored that quite a lot [in *In The Name Of The Father* and *The Boxer*), but I hadn't explored it from the point of view of a British soldier's experience. So, I wanted to learn more and more about that, and also about the aftermath of combat, which I'd started to take an interest in some years ago when I read [journalist] David Finkel's books, *The Good Soldiers* [2009], and *Thank You For Your Service* [2013], which are incredible accounts of a group of Marines in Iraq, and then how they struggle to rediscover some kind of life for themselves when they come back home. And Erich Maria Remarque's follow-up to *All Quiet On The Western Front, The Road Back* [1931], which is possibly one of the first literary accounts of PTSD. But the truth is that I really felt inside of it. In terms of who Ray was as a person, I didn't need to know anything else. ›



> "THERE WAS A POINT WHERE WE BOTH REALISED [THIS WAS PERSONAL], AND STARTED TO EMBRACE IT."
>
> Ronan Day-Lewis

**Main:** A walk in the woods in *Anemone*. **Far left, top to bottom:** Ray's estranged ex, Nessa (Samantha Morton); And equally estranged son, Brian (Samuel Bottomley); Daniel Day-Lewis as Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood* (2007). **Left:** As Reynolds Woodcock in *Phantom Thread* (2017). **Below, left to right:** 1993's *In The Name Of The Father*; Fighting fit in *The Boxer* (1997).

**Ronan:** I remember early on, just being so fascinated by the way he was slipping in and out of this character as we were writing. There was something really special happening. I started to feel that there was this blurring of the line between him as a co-writer, and him as an actor, in this role.

**Daniel, was it different for you doing that alongside your son? Did it change the way you tackled it at all?**
**Daniel:** No. Not at all, no. Because from a very young age, and over the years... I definitely tried to protect Ronan from the worst of my excesses. (*Laughs*) And he had grown up with it, and therefore I felt completely at ease in that. Thinking about it now, I could easily have felt self-conscious, but I didn't.

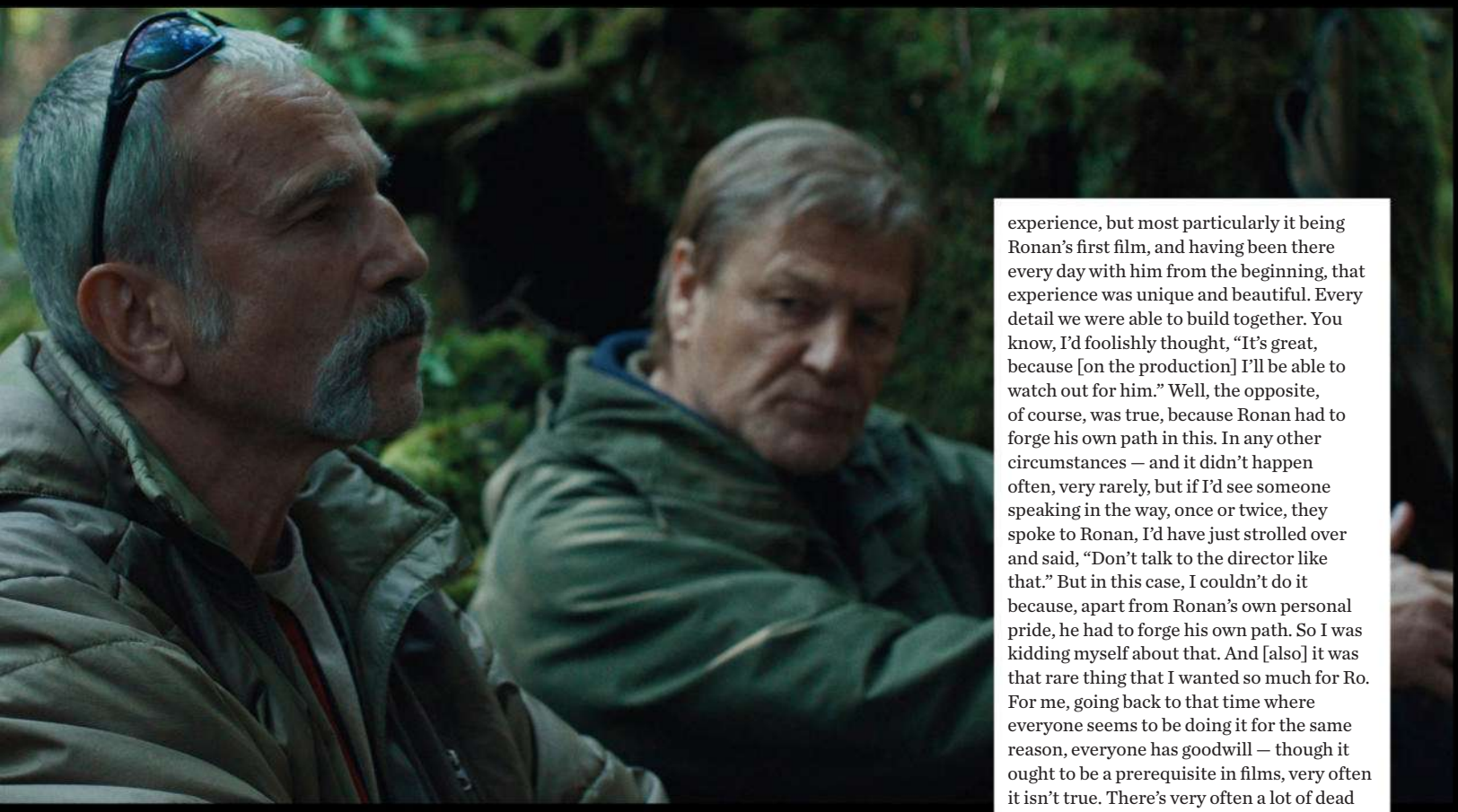
**Ronan, what was it like spending so much time with Ray Stoker?**
**Ronan:** I mean, it was amazing, because it felt like I never truly left the world of the film. We'd spend, obviously, a lot of time together off set as well, and then I'd come back on set, and there wasn't that transition back into that world; it felt like I was kind of always in it. So it was a really interesting paradox where it was, you know, my dad, but then also Ray, superimposed over him.

**In a 2002 interview, Daniel, you said of your own father [the Poet Laureate Cecil Day Lewis], "He was a very sweet man. He had been smothered by his own dad, so he felt he had to give his children a little more space than they wanted. I don't want my kids to have to miss me the way I miss my dad, the way you miss a person who was not really there." *Anemone* is about fathers, and absent fathers. How personal is it for you both?**
**Ronan:** It's interesting: when we were writing, it was incredibly unconscious, and then certain aspects that felt more personal started to creep up on us. There was a certain point where we both realised that, and started to embrace it. But yeah (*to Daniel*), I'd love to hear your perspective on it, in terms of your dad, and whether that was something from the start that you were...
**Daniel:** I'm not sure that I ever consciously thought about my relationship with my father in connection with what we were doing. But it's also true to say that the relationship between fathers and sons has always been a source of fascination for me. Other people's relationships with their fathers I'm almost equally fascinated by. My... Mine, with my own father, I said it, I think, quite succinctly in what you just read, which I'm failing to do now, but it was kind of ghosted, that relationship, a little bit, partly by his early death. Largely to do with his early death. It was unresolved. If such a thing ever could have been resolved, I've no doubt, if I'd grown into adulthood, and my father would have been open to it, I'd have had a lot of questions for him about that sense of his absence when he was still alive. And I don't think it was intentional or conscious on his part; he was a very, very self-absorbed man by virtue of the work that he did. I've no doubt that he'd say that he loved us, but my sense of myself, in my memory, is always that my conversations with him were almost invariably when I got into trouble, which was often (*laughs*), so I just didn't know that person. And so on an unconscious level, I've no doubt that if I'm exploring that as a subject, it's going to find its way in.
**Ronan:** For me, it was also this idea that started to take form with [Ray's son] Brian, that even if you have a great relationship with your dad in the present — and we *do* have this real closeness — there's this fascination with your parents' past lives that you weren't around for, and what that means for your identity in terms of how you perceive yourself.
**Daniel:** When I think back, and I definitely have thought about it often over the years... My greatest fear was that somehow I would have inherited that inclination towards distance with my own children. That was a *terrible* fear of mine. I'm so attached to my family that it didn't seem possible. But reeling back over the years, imagining Ronan, say, knocking on the door and saying, "Do you fancy a kick around?" and me saying, "I'd love to, but I can't right now"... I would have flayed myself with memories like that, missed opportunities. That ran very deep in me, that fear that somehow I would replicate in my own life that distance from my kids, and praise be to God, I don't think I did.

**Daniel, you've said over the years that when you finish a film, you feel a terrible sadness, if not a bereavement. Presumably, because of the circumstances, you didn't feel that so acutely this time.**
**Daniel:** I didn't feel it this time. It was just a lovely gift that I was given. From the entire

> **"OVER THE YEARS, I DEFINITELY TRIED TO PROTECT RONAN FROM THE WORST OF MY EXCESSES."**
> *Daniel Day-Lewis*

**Clockwise from main:** Strained relations; Son and father, immersed in work (and water); The brothers take a dip; 1989's *My Left Foot*.



experience, but most particularly it being Ronan's first film, and having been there every day with him from the beginning, that experience was unique and beautiful. Every detail we were able to build together. You know, I'd foolishly thought, "It's great, because [on the production] I'll be able to watch out for him." Well, the opposite, of course, was true, because Ronan had to forge his own path in this. In any other circumstances — and it didn't happen often, very rarely, but if I'd see someone speaking in the way, once or twice, they spoke to Ronan, I'd have just strolled over and said, "Don't talk to the director like that." But in this case, I couldn't do it because, apart from Ronan's own personal pride, he had to forge his own path. So I was kidding myself about that. And [also] it was that rare thing that I wanted so much for Ro. For me, going back to that time where everyone seems to be doing it for the same reason, everyone has goodwill — though it ought to be a prerequisite in films, very often it isn't true. There's very often a lot of dead wood, people get bored, people get pissed off, people sign up for all kinds of reasons. If it's just for the money, fair play to them, it's a job, so it's not a criticism, but when I started out, I had that experience a couple of times. *My Left Foot*, particularly, was my first experience where I thought, "Everyone is doing this for the right reasons." And it was like going back to that.

**Has having such a positive experience changed the way you feel about future work?**

**Daniel:** I'm certainly not closed to the idea of it. I don't have an indiscriminate appetite. The appetite always seems to emerge in relation to something that I've become fascinated with, and I believe that could very easily happen. I'm certainly not going to shy away from it. I wouldn't shy away from it.

**The experience you had on this film clearly means the world to both of you.**

**Ronan:** It was terrifying at first, because both of us had, for different reasons, reservations. I mean (*to Daniel*), on your end, obviously, you had given up that work, for the time being. And then for me, I had been wanting to make films for a long time, and the idea of making this together as my first film, I did have these fears about just the optics of that. But then I thought about it and I was like, "In ten years, if I think back on this, and I didn't do it, it would haunt me forever."

**Daniel:** Yeah, me too.

*ANEMONE* WILL SCREEN IN ASSOCIATION WITH *EMPIRE* AT THIS YEAR'S BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL ON OCTOBER 14, AND IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 7

# LOVING THE ALIEN

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

*PREY*, A BOLD REINVENTION OF AN ICONIC ANTAGONIST, WAS JUST THE BEGINNING. AS WE FIND OUT ON SET OF **PREDATOR: BADLANDS**, DIRECTOR DAN TRACHTENBERG JUST CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF THE MERCILESS, MANDIBLE-WIELDING HUNTERS…

# BENEATH A SKY DOTTED WITH BRUISE-PURPLE CLOUDS, RUSHING WATER FREEFALLS DOWN 100 FEET OF VOLCANIC ROCK.

As it pummels the river below, the roar is so loud, you can barely hear yourself think. All around is lush, green forest, interspersed with moss-covered cliffs and dappled sunlight. It's an idyllic sight — one that, ordinarily, would be a breathtaking reminder of the raw power and beauty of planet Earth.

Today, though, it has a dreadlocked alien stomping about in front of it.

It's August 2024, and *Empire* is at Hūnua Falls, an aggressively picturesque plunge waterfall an hour outside Auckland, New Zealand. It's the 39th day of shooting on *Predator: Badlands*, and this location is currently posing for Genna, a "death planet" housing some of the universe's most fearsome creatures, on which an undersized Predator and a robot's severed torso are stranded. Have you heard the one about the undersized Predator and the robot's severed torso stranded on an alien death-planet? Probably not, because director Dan Trachtenberg is not in the business of re-hashing.

"In general, I'm always looking for: what could happen only in *this* movie?" he tells us, before braving the squelching mud to issue instructions to his Predator (Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi, clad in body armour and dreadlocked mask) and severed robot (Elle Fanning, sat in a hole to obscure her legs). "It's a kind of buddy-comedy," the director grins, as he returns behind the camera. "*Prey* was a solo survival tale; this is a relationship story."

*Prey* is the reason we are here — the reason Trachtenberg has been given the keys to the *Predator* kingdom. Since John McTiernan's Arnie-powered 1987 original, the franchise — about a race of vicious extraterrestrial trophy-hunters — had slogged through three decades of dodgy sequels and false starts. Then came *Prey*. Released to streaming in 2022, Trachtenberg's slick prequel pushed the universe in a bold new direction, winding back to 1719 to track young Native American woman Naru (Amber Midthunder) as she protected her tribe against a dreaded (in both senses) invader. The film garnered glittering reviews and in the US became Hulu's most-watched premiere.

"People liked *Prey* because it was lean and mean — a 90-minute thrill-ride," Trachtenberg tells *Empire* a year on from *Badlands*' shoot, from the more comfortable (albeit less picturesque) setting of his LA office. "It shared the same formula as the first *Predator* — starting out one thing, then becoming a slasher movie — but there was enough 'new' in the recipe, too. It was a film my mom could get something out of."

The movie's reach went far beyond Trachtenberg's immediate family. Both die-hard fans and *Predator* newbies lapped it up, and studio execs quickly tasked the director with producing an equally fresh-feeling follow-up. "You immediately think: 'Prey 2'," Trachtenberg smiles. "But with sequels, people sometimes get so caught up going, 'This could happen next,' they never stop to think, '*Should* it happen next?' *Prey* was special because it was this big idea that hadn't existed before. I wanted the next thing to be that, too."

Intent on reinventing the alien wheel all over again, Trachtenberg looked back over the five previous *Predator* films (seven, including the *Alien Vs. Predator* crossovers), and realised they all had one thing in common: the Predator was defeated at the end. And with that, the "big idea" powering *Predator: Badlands* was born.

What could happen only in *this* movie? The Predator could win.

THE SEED FOR this ludicrously bold swing was initially planted in Trachtenberg's brain by another iconic sci-fi universe. Specifically: the first trailer for 2015's *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

You remember the moment. Against a backdrop of alien sand-dunes we are offered our first look at the galaxy's newest hero — John Boyega's Finn — only to discover that he is in fact... a stormtrooper. "I think about that moment a lot," says Trachtenberg. "The possibilities of what it meant bloomed out in your mind. That moment is absolutely part of my interest in pursuing unique protagonists."

Here was a major sci-fi franchise revealing that there were decent, complex, *heroic* individuals within the ranks of its arch-villains (hashtag #NotAllStormtroopers). The concept was one Trachtenberg returned to as he fleshed out his new story. "There's one version of 'The Predator Wins' that's just a slasher film where you're *with* the slasher. That didn't thrill me," he says. "More interesting was digging into these creatures' culture to create

**Clockwise from top:** Dek (Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi), Father (Reuben De Jong) and Kwei (Mike Homik) put on a show; Dakota Fanning's legless android Thia; Dek gives it serious Jedi-esque welly; Fanning and director Dan Trachtenberg on set; Dek pauses as the world burns; Dek and Kwei; Thia in the wild.

a protagonist we can connect to."

Something of a challenge, since the Yautja — those swishy-haired aliens commonly known as 'Predators' — are a race of brutal trophy-hunters whose hobbies include blasting victims with shoulder cannons and then skinning them alive. The solution Trachtenberg and co-writer Patrick Aison (who also penned *Prey*) found was to focus on a "runt of the litter" Yautja named Dek, desperate to prove himself a worthy warrior. Standing just over six foot (pint-sized compared to the usual seven-foot-plus Predators), Dek lives in the shadow of his more imposing father and brother; a weak link in a culture that values strength over all. "It's a universal theme — someone trying to prove themselves," says Trachtenberg. "Who can't relate to self-doubt and feeling underestimated?"

Trachtenberg and Aison set their script in the far-future, following Dek as he voyages to Genna with the aim of killing an "unkillable" beast, and forcing his old man to eat a big batch of humble pie in the process. "It's like a Ray Harryhausen movie," laughs Trachtenberg. "This crazy adventure against monsters and the elements — only this time it's a badass Predator against those things. We wanted Dek to be relatable, but without turning him into Luke Skywalker. He's still a Predator — we had to allow him to be a dick. But a dick you can root for."

Trachtenberg was intent on having no humans in the movie ("People would latch onto the human: then the creature's [no longer] the hero"). But he still wanted someone — or some*thing* — for Dek to riff off. "So, I thought, 'What about a robot?' And then I thought: 'Wait! I know a company that makes robots!'"

That company's name was Weyland-Yutani. And with that, this "big idea" was about to get a whole lot bigger.

ON THE DECK of a vast starship, armed to the teeth with bio-weapons, *Empire* is staring at a faded logo adorning the far wall. It's a logo that will be instantly recognisable to fans of the *Alien* franchise. It contains the letters 'WY'.

It's the day after our trip to Hūnua Falls, and we are now touring the *Predator: Badlands* sets at Auckland Film Studios. We've just ambled past what appears to be a 20-foot-high nest (home to that aforementioned "unkillable" beast, perhaps?), been shown some of Dek's weaponry (neon-red foldable sword, 'razorgrass' whip, a bow that "shoots energy"), and we are now stood on a soundstage housing a bona fide Weyland-Yutani cargo vessel.

The highly shady Weyland-Yutani Corporation is, of course, known for manufacturing the human-like synthetic androids ('synths') that populate the *Alien* films. The two franchises have cross-pollinated before — with *Alien Vs. Predator* movies in 2004 and 2007 — but ›

Trachtenberg is eager to clarify that Badlands is *not* an *AVP* film. "There's no Xenomorph in this movie," he says. "But to me, that makes it more exciting. We're not involving [the *Alien* franchise] just to smush the action figures together. There are great, organic story reasons for Weyland-Yutani to be in this film."

Among those reasons is the corporation's decision to post an all-synth mission to Genna, which is derailed when one synth — Elle Fanning's Thia — is sliced in half and left stranded. "Thia has been on Genna a while, seeing things she wouldn't normally see," Fanning says. "She's absorbing all this new information, and she's broken too, so she's become very different from the other synths."

When Dek stumbles upon her, it's the beginning of an 'odd-couple' journey that Trachtenberg likens to *Midnight Run*, *Lethal Weapon* and the dynamic between Chewbacca and C-3PO in *The Empire Strikes Back*. "Except C-3PO is a nervous Nellie," the director notes. "Thia is unflappable — she's positive, no matter what. That's a funny character to be stuck with an asshole." "Stuck" being the operative word: for much of the film, legless Thia is literally strapped to Dek's back (the codename for the then-untitled film when *Empire* was on set was 'Predator: Backpack').

"Dek writes Thia off as just a tool he can use," says Fanning. "But she's spunky and courageous. We used the term 'buddy-comedy' a lot. I'd make up little songs for Thia to sing." She laughs: "They were *so* cheesy. I think Dan cut them. He was like, 'Yeah, this might be stretching it...'"

The 'buddy-comedy' element is very much on display back at Hūnua Falls. The scene *Empire* witnesses beneath the waterfall sees Thia describing a predator called a wolf that lives on a planet called Earth, while Dek stares down at her, bewildered. "As their friendship grows, they find connections," Fanning explains. "Dek has this [complex] relationship with his brother, and Thia has her, erm... 'sister'." Said "erm-sister" is Tessa (also played by Fanning), another synth on the same mission, about whom the actress is keeping schtum, except to say she is "drastically different" to Thia.

"Luckily, I [rarely] had to play both the same day," Fanning laughs. "But it was daunting playing Weyland-Yutani synths. Think about the list of people who've played one!" While she did re-watch the *Alien* films to see the likes of Ian Holm and Michael Fassbender in android action, Fanning also took cues from a newer addition to the synthetic line-up — David Jonsson's Andy. "We went to see *Alien: Romulus* while we were shooting," she recalls. "[Jonsson] is *such* a great actor. That was informative for me, to see him step outside of other synths and create his own version. It gave me confidence to create my own thing, too."

To play Dek, newcomer Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi also went back to the previous *Predator* films to study the Yautjas' movement. "They're *heavy*, so every step has that weight," he tells us. "But they're also proud apex predators, so they stand straight, chest out." To get into Dek's mindset, he listened to Australian rap group ONEFOUR. "Their music is about... not-nice things," he laughs. "But it translated to Dek's mentality. Violence is the culture he grew up in. Yautja society is built on hunting, so Dek sees it as honourable."

Having starred in various New Zealand

**Clockwise from main:** Fanning and Schuster-Koloamatangi have each other's backs; The eyes have it; Another string to Dek's bow; Giving Thia a hand; Hitting the Dek.

TV shows, Schuster-Koloamatangi was cast after an audition that saw him run an "*American Ninja Warrior*-style" obstacle course, as well as improvise an invented alien language. Being of Samoan and Tongan heritage, he blended the two dialects together "to see if it would fly". It did. "I was on a date when I heard I got the part," the actor chuckles. "I was so buzzing. I had to say to her, 'Sorry, can I drop you home because I *really* need to tell my family something...'"

It was possibly for the best that Schuster-Koloamatangi's love life was sidelined: playing Dek was all-consuming. As *Empire* witnesses on set, portraying a Predator requires far more than simply pulling a helmet on and grunting. Not only is Dek's mask open-faced, allowing Schuster-Koloamatangi's expressions to be used for facial capture, but he also had to learn and deliver *all* his lines in Yautja — a newly invented tongue, created by Britton Watkins, previously a Klingon consultant on *Star Trek* films.

"It was *so* detailed," says Schuster-Koloamatangi of the language. "Different words for singulars and plurals. The most difficult was the 'click' sound, deep in the throat..." He performs it — a contraction of the larynx that sounds a little like Maggie Simpson sucking her pacifier ("I've been told I make the 'Predator click' when I sleep," Fanning informs us).

There were tough physical challenges, too. Schuster-Koloamatangi had Fanning *genuinely* strapped to his back for much of the shoot, through forests and rushing rivers. "It was too much trouble to unstrap us between takes," recalls Fanning, "so I'd be there on his back, like, 'Shall we get some snacks?'"

"It was quite an ordeal," says Trachtenberg of the location shooting. "Wading through rivers, doing these crazy stunts in the stickiest, heaviest mud. Plus, we had this other thing cooking at the same time."

Ah yes, the other thing. *Empire* didn't know it back in 2024 as we watched the director squelch through the Auckland mud, but he wasn't just making a new *Predator* movie. He was making two new *Predator* movies.

"IT WAS *CRAZY*," LAUGHS Trachtenberg today. "Every day, when cameras finishing rolling on *Badlands*, I'd be up on a muddy hill, trying to get internet to look at *Killer Of Killers* animation."

*Badlands* was not, then, the only "big idea" Trachtenberg cooked up in *Prey*'s wake. Produced in secret throughout 2024, then released on Disney+ this June, Trachtenberg's *Predator: Killer Of Killers* was yet another new swing for the franchise — an animated anthology film tracking Yautja attacks in *three* different eras: Viking, feudal Japan and World War II. "We had fun with the drama of each setting," says the director. "I wanted conflict in every story even before the Predator showed up."

*Killer Of Killers* was received positively, with fans particularly excited by the fleeting appearance of Arnold Schwarzenegger's original Predator-buster, Dutch, glimpsed frozen in Yautja captivity, beside *Prey*'s Naru. "I met Arnold," says Trachtenberg, "and he said, 'You'd think I get, "I'll be back," yelled at me most, but it's actually, "Get to the chopper!"' So, he's well aware of the franchise's staying power. He was excited to talk about what else we could do. Because there's so much more story to tell now — you could tell how [Dutch and Naru] were captured, or what happens when they're de-iced. Many possibilities."

Clearly, Trachtenberg is revelling in his position at the helm of this beloved franchise, refreshing and evolving it with every new instalment. Since his superb 2016 debut, *10 Cloverfield Lane*, he has exclusively made *Predator* films. Does he hanker to explore non-dreadlocked-alien avenues? "I'm very divided on that," he admits. "There are things I wanted to make ten years ago that I'm still desperate to make. But within this [*Predator*] universe, I'm getting to make movies I want to make anyway. *Prey* was like: 'I get to make *The Revenant* or *Gravity*, just inside this franchise.'"

For now, he definitely has one more *Predator* project on the horizon — and it's already cooking. "I had three ideas after *Prey*," he tells us. "Part of the reason I raced to do *Killer Of Killers* and *Badlands* simultaneously was because there's this third thing." He flashes a grin: "I wanna get to that *real* bad."

After the boundary-pushing boldness of his Yautja adventures so far, the idea of an even wilder Dan Trachtenberg *Predator* film coming down the pipeline is quite something.

What — you wonder — could happen only in *that* movie?

***PREDATOR: BADLANDS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 7**

# BACKPACK BUDDIES

## HE'S BEHIND YOU...

### EL TOPO

**Alejandro Jodorowsky's batshit acid-Western immerses us in a psychedelic landscape rammed with unforgettable characters — from monk-kissing bandits to stiletto-sniffing cowboys. Its most striking figure, however, remains that of the armless man and his legless, shoulder-straddling compadre, symbiotically linked in their pursuit of nirvana. (The transcendent state, not the band.)**

### THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

**C-3PO is a great many things: fluent in over six million forms of communication; an ever-loyal protocol droid; the only character to have appeared in every Skywalker Saga movie. And after being blasted apart by stormtroopers in *The Empire Strikes Back*, he also makes a rather fetching gold backpack for Chewie.**

### GAME OF THRONES

**If the fantasy saga's loveable giant Hodor is famous for one thing, it's holding the door. If he's famous for two things, it's holding the door and holding Bran Stark. Let's be real: Bran The Wise would've *never* made it onto the Iron Throne without Hodor's five-season-spanning piggyback assist.**

### SWISS ARMY MAN

**No list of backpack buddies would be complete without Hank and Manny, the odd-couple duo driving Daniels' absurdist 2016 comedy *Swiss Army Man*. Paul Dano's suicidal, desert-island-stranded Hank provides the back, while Daniel Radcliffe's flatulence-propelled, compass-penised, water-retentive corpse Manny makes for a hell of a pack. *Accio chiropractor*...** JORDAN KING

Alamy, HBO

# REBORN IN THE USA

**BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN'S 1982 ALBUM *NEBRASKA* WAS AN INTIMATE ABOUT-TURN. AND AS DIRECTOR SCOTT COOPER AND STAR JEREMY ALLEN WHITE TELL US, SPRINGSTEEN: DELIVER ME FROM NOWHERE AIMS FOR THE SAME…**

WORDS
**HAYLEY CAMPBELL**

# SCOTT COOPER DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE A BIOPIC.

After he wrote and directed 2009's *Crazy Heart*, a film starring Jeff Bridges as an alcoholic country singer, he was offered all kinds of biopics for musicians he loved: Elvis, Miles Davis, Chet Baker. But he turned them all down, making films about American mobsters (*Black Mass*), dark American history (*Hostiles*) and murder (*The Pale Blue Eye*) instead. Then, in 2023, someone came to him with a book by Warren Zanes, *Deliver Me From Nowhere: The Making Of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska,* and asked if he was a fan. "Who isn't?" Cooper replied. This time it was different. For Cooper, the idea hit on something that had been missing from every other musician's story he was offered. This was not a biopic. This was something else. The making of *Nebraska* is a ghost story.

In September 1981, Springsteen had just finished touring his album *The River,* at that point his biggest commercial success. He rented a house in Colts Neck, New Jersey — the township next to where he grew up — and as Cooper puts it, "The quiet got too loud." Isolated in a house that was not his own, with nothing much to do, Springsteen was suddenly confronted with everything he had been suppressing: his traumatic childhood, his feelings of alienation, a kind of survivor's guilt for having made it. He was months away from a mental breakdown he would speak about publicly decades later, but in that house, he was alone with his ghosts. To them, he added more.

He was reading Flannery O'Connor's short stories, and was taken with their violence and grey morality. He was thinking about Charles Laughton's film *The Night Of The Hunter,* and Robert Frank's book of black-and-white photographs, *The Americans,* which showed loneliness across the social classes. He was watching Terrence Malick's *Badlands,* a film based on the true story of the American spree-killer Charles Starkweather and his teenage girlfriend. (In a 1981 version of disappearing down a YouTube rabbit hole, Springsteen phoned the reporter who covered those killings in the 1950s. She still worked at the same newspaper.) He began to write lyrics, stories about isolation and despair, things he was experiencing himself as he reckoned with the baggage of his childhood, yet to be unpacked. They were violent, unsentimental, and told a story about a specific American hopelessness. But he wanted to make himself a ghost, too: as invisible as possible. He was already more famous than he was

**Above:** Born to strum: Jeremy Allen White as Bruce Springsteen. **Above right, top to bottom:** Facing his fears; Single mum and love interest Faye (Odessa Young); Struggling with the "dark sludge". **Left:** White and director Scott Cooper on set.

comfortable with, and he wanted to know he was capable of disappearing. Writing these stories in the first person, he invoked other people's voices, including that of a murderer singing from the electric chair.

The music he made — recorded in a bedroom on a four-track tape recorder with two microphones and a Gibson J-200 guitar — was never supposed to be released. It was just a demo; notes for the E Street Band to turn into something real. He carried the cassette around in his back pocket, without a case. But when he got to that recording studio with the band, trying to make it better only made it worse. They were losing something; a certain ghostliness. So Springsteen released the demo. *Nebraska* is an album made by a man in a haunted house, who was singing to himself.

Cooper cannot tell you how many times he has heard it. "My father, who died the day before I started shooting this film, introduced me to *Nebraska* when I was a teen," he says. "It's my favourite of Bruce's records. I'd always been drawn to it because of its power and its starkness, its silence, and the way that it holds the space for things that we don't say, or we're afraid to say." Cooper listened to it on repeat when he was writing his second film, 2013's *Out Of The Furnace*, starring Christian Bale and Casey Affleck, about a steel-mill worker searching for his missing brother. "It was an album that I would always turn to when I was thinking about what might be next. Just to hear Bruce's voice, and to think about the moral wasteland, and a story that I might want to tell."

Springsteen, who had also been turning down biopic offers (although those were about himself), saw a kinship in those stories Cooper was telling. Eventually the two would become so close that when Cooper and his family lost their house in the Pacific Palisades fire this January, Springsteen invited them to stay with him, and replaced Cooper's daughter's burned guitar with one of his own. But back in 2023 when they first met, and Cooper pitched him the idea of a film about this specific time in his life — as stark, raw and vulnerable as the album itself — Springsteen simply said to him, "You seem to be telling the American story in the way that I am."

IN THIS FILM ABOUT HAUNTINGS, COOPER WANTED to capture a spirit. He could see Jeremy Allen White's bone structure in the black-and-white pictures in the liner notes of *Nebraska,* but this was not about looking like Springsteen. "Humility and swagger," says Cooper, summing up the spirit of Bruce Springsteen. "And they don't teach swagger at RADA. You either have it or you don't. Jeremy Allen White has it. He's from Brooklyn, he grew up on the streets. He *moves* like Bruce Springsteen." He would also have to sing like Bruce Springsteen, and play the guitar like Bruce Springsteen. White had five months to make it happen, taking both singing and guitar lessons on most days of the week. But his first task was to find the human in the god.

"I had to take the musician and the icon out of the equation," says White. "I think if I approached it immediately as, 'You're playing Bruce Springsteen, this is what it means to this many people, this is his discography,' it would have been too overwhelming. So I started it like any sort of job: I just tried to ›

approach him as a person." He first met Springsteen during a soundcheck at a Wembley Stadium show in July 2024, but while he hung out with him at other times through the course of filming, he was meeting him at a different stage of his life. So he had to go deeper. He read Zanes' book and listened repeatedly to Springsteen's autobiography, read by the man himself. The most useful thing he found, though, was an old interview on YouTube, taken from a 1978 episode of the BBC music series *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. "It was the closest to the age that we find him in the film. It was about a ten-minute interview and I watched that all the time, just for his voice."

Springsteen's voice. White had to capture it in speech, including immediately after leaving the stage in scenes with Springsteen's manager and friend, Jon Landau, played by Jeremy Strong (White would scream into a pillow to force the required hoarseness), and in songs both quiet and loud. "Some of the louder songs, like 'Born To Run', were more difficult," says White. "It's very hard to prepare for that. Bruce had a lot of time — he came up in bar bands, and I only had five months. And so it was difficult for me to get some of those songs without just trying to shout in key, and that's kind of what I ended up doing. It worked, eventually, but it took a lot of time and a lot of sweat and strain, which you can, uh, see in my neck veins."

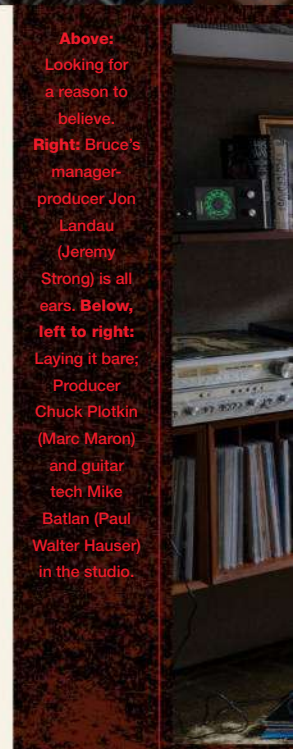
Recording the quieter *Nebraska* came with its own problems — "Bruce's phrasing in that album is kind of all over the place, and you can hear him finding the song while singing it" — but there was one song in particular that took it all the way out of White: 'Born In The USA', which isn't on *Nebraska*, but was originally one of those demos. "I had a couple of other songs to record later that day that I didn't end up getting because my voice was so torched," he says. That night, Springsteen was doing a Q&A after a premiere of the documentary *Road Diary: Bruce Springsteen And The E Street Band*. White went along to see him. "I spent some time with him afterwards and I was speaking to him and my voice was totally gone. And Bruce asked, '... Did you record 'Born In The USA' today?'" White laughs. "And I said, 'Yes. Yes I did.'"

WHITE HAS PLAYED A REAL PERSON before — he was Kerry Von Erich in Sean Durkin's 2023 wrestling film, *The Iron Claw* — but no-one living, and certainly no-one as involved as Bruce Springsteen was in the telling of this story. Springsteen gave his real clothes from 1981 to the costume department, gifted White his own guitar, and loaned his handwritten *Nebraska* lyrics to Cooper to use in the recording scenes (Springsteen still, to this day, keeps these lyrics in a *Peanuts* binder with Snoopy on the cover). And, terrifyingly, Springsteen made set visits.

"I find so much that the job of an actor is just to try and live in as much delusion as you possibly can," says White. "Like, to try and trick yourself. I found it hard to do at the beginning because I'd do a scene and then I'd walk past the video village, and the man is *right there,"* he laughs. "But we found a rhythm after the first week or so. By the second or third week of the film, I found it incredibly valuable."

Whenever Springsteen had notes, he passed them to Cooper. Sometimes they would be about White's singing — "Bruce has a very specific way of singing which nobody can quite replicate; it's very, very physical," says the director — but mostly it would be when a scene sparked a memory that Cooper could use. With White, he kept his distance and let him get on with the job. "[But] he always made a point of sending me a message every night about some moment that day that he found particularly true. He was incredibly supportive all the way," says the actor. Cooper adds: "I think people loved having Bruce there, because his spirit just infused the production. And again, thinking about hauntings? He haunted it, in the best of ways."

The making of *Nebraska* is about a man on the brink of falling apart. Some parts were still too tender a bruise. "There were moments for Bruce where things became too heavy and he would walk off set," says Cooper. Mostly, they were childhood scenes from the dilapidated family home, with Stephen Graham playing his father. Springsteen still drives past that house three times



**Above:** Looking for a reason to believe. **Right:** Bruce's manager-producer Jon Landau (Jeremy Strong) is all ears. **Below, left to right:** Laying it bare; Producer Chuck Plotkin (Marc Maron) and guitar tech Mike Batlan (Paul Walter Hauser) in the studio.

**Top to bottom:** Douglas 'Dutch' Springsteen (Stephen Graham) with his young son Bruce (Matthew Anthony Pellicano Jr); Bossing it behind the mixing desk; Struggling to connect.

a week even now. He also remains in therapy, which he started back when he didn't even know what to name his depression; he called it "black sludge". "In 1982, men never spoke about it vulnerably, without bravado," says Cooper. "Because in Bruce's era, and before that, men were taught to push through things, be strong, man up. I hope that we've handled his mental health and masculinity in a way that doesn't feel self-aware. Because in 1982, people weren't aware of this. It just kind of festered in them, in the dark."

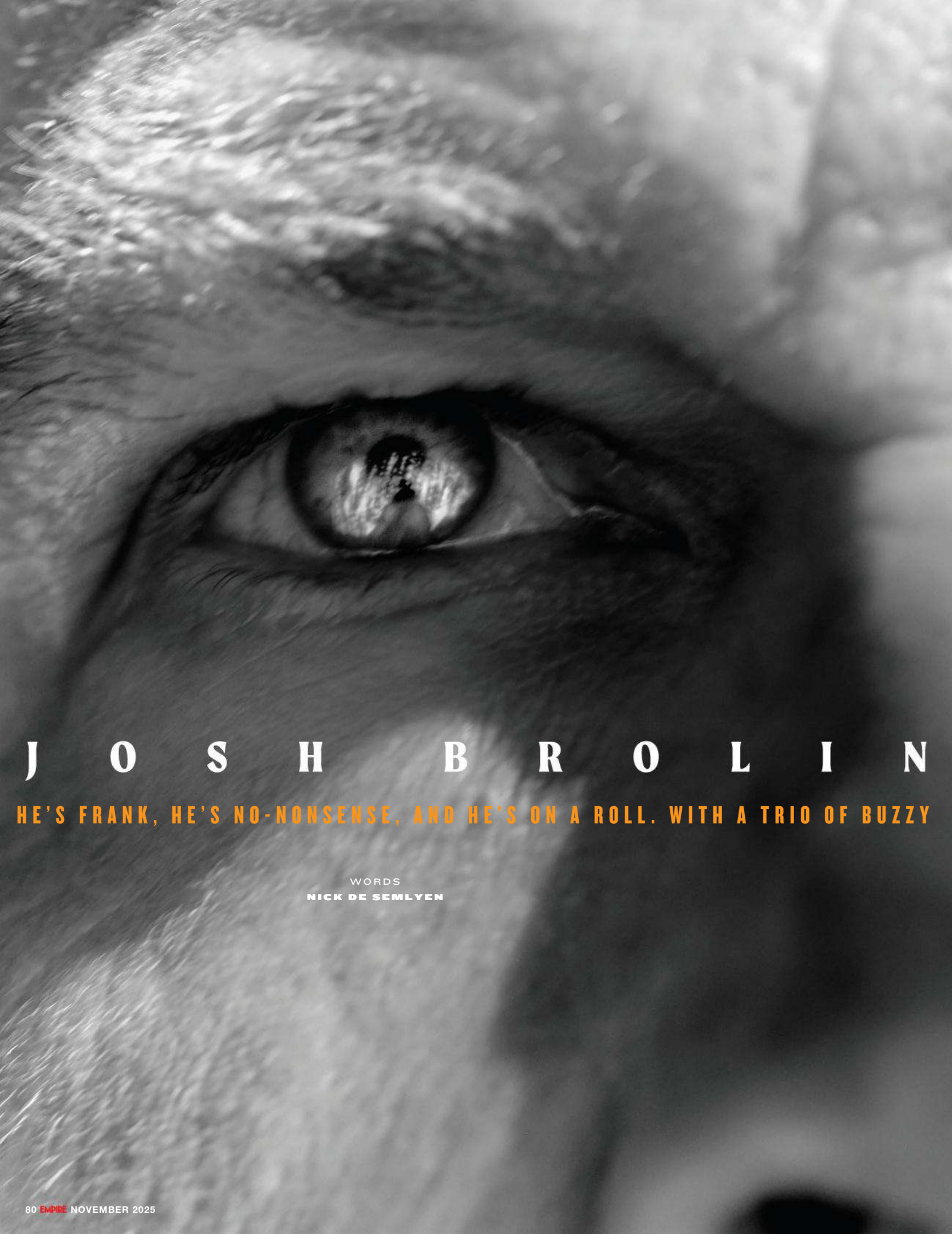
Though it sometimes hurt Springsteen to watch, nothing in his life was off-limits. "He said to me, 'Scott, the truth about yourself isn't always pretty,'" says Cooper. "We discussed that this was going to be a film so far removed from the mythology of the rock star. The thing that was most important to him was that this would be no hagiography. There'll be things in this film that will be new information to even Bruce's most ardent fans — not covered in his Broadway show, or in documentaries, or in his memoir. And he never once asked me to sand off the rough edges. But would you expect anything else from Bruce Springsteen? This man who's the reluctant moral conscience of America?"

SPRINGSTEEN'S SONGS HAVE been misread as patriotic anthems by people who weren't listening to the lyrics — Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump among them, politicians that Springsteen has never supported ('Born In The USA', a prime example, is about an alienated Vietnam veteran). When *Empire* asks if Cooper wanted to lean into the politics of the Springsteen story, he responds, "Making a film about Bruce Springsteen can't help but be political. I mean, not in a partisan way, but political in the way that Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath* is political, because it's grappling with the lives of working-class people, and the American dream, and our failures, and the moral cost of power and poverty and disillusionment. Bruce has always written about the forgotten, and the disenfranchised, the working class, and that's inherently political, especially if you portray these themes truthfully — because they challenge the official narratives that we're fed of success and patriotism and prosperity. Bruce's identity *is* the American political story."

*Nebraska* was released the year that *TIME* magazine picked, for its Man Of The Year, the personal computer — the first non-human to be honoured — and the film comes out as AI is changing the world again. Cooper, who dug out vintage recording equipment to capture the ethereal ghostliness that Springsteen created in that bedroom 44 years ago, gets visibly worked up talking about the cold horrors of AI. "If you think about Bruce Springsteen, you think about soul, right? So this is soul versus code. It's the poetry of lived experience versus the efficiency of simulated output," he says. "AI is calculation and pattern and abstraction, and Bruce is all flesh and instinct and human suffering. Bruce writes from his life. I've always said AI doesn't have childhood trauma." When Springsteen released that demo, it came with all the off-key vocals and the cassette hiss that it always had. "AI is efficient and optimised and perfect, and Bruce embraces imperfection, like this movie does. You'll even hear guitar flubs and voice-cracks. These aren't flaws; these are human fingerprints."

Cooper appreciates the timing, and the clash, and hopes the film can serve as something else — not a straight-up biopic, not even a celebration of an artist he loves, but a psychological drama about creation. "I hope that this film reminds people that simplicity can be radical. And vulnerability can be more powerful than spectacle. I think people who come to this film and expect a lot of the hits, a stadium show — they're gonna be sorely disappointed," Cooper laughs. "That was not my goal. I was never telling that story."

***SPRINGSTEEN: DELIVER ME FROM NOWHERE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 24**



# JOSH BROLIN

## HE'S FRANK, HE'S NO-NONSENSE, AND HE'S ON A ROLL. WITH A TRIO OF BUZZY

WORDS
**NICK DE SEMLYEN**

Josh Brolin, photographed exclusively at Verge Studios, Los Angeles, on August 31, 2025.

# W O N ' T Q U I T

## MOVIES OUT THIS YEAR, THE ACTOR TELLS US WHY HE STARES FEAR IN THE FACE

ARSENII VASELENKO

# HE HAS ALWAYS LIVED AT FULL PELT.

That's the Josh Brolin way. For evidence, pick up his extraordinary 2024 memoir *From Under The Truck*, which packs in an incredible amount of incident: growing up with wild beasts in the house, a bad acid trip, his years running with a California gang called the Cito Rats, the time he got stabbed in Costa Rica, an occasion on which he got drunk and told Robert De Niro, "You got a fucking face."

On screen, too, there's no shortage of wild stuff happening; Thanos (whom Brolin zestfully describes as "big, purple, ball-sack-chinned") hurling a moon at Robert Downey Jr is just the beginning. He's plundered pirate treasure, played a President, clambered up Everest, survived Juárez and Arrakis. In the recent surprise summer smash *Weapons* he faces down some of his wildest stuff yet: no spoilers here, but once viewed, the scene in which he repeatedly hurls another character around a room is unlikely to be forgotten. His upcoming performances as a sinister TV exec in Edgar Wright's *The Running Man* and a man of the cloth in Rian Johnson's *Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery* promise to add yet more twists to an audacious, corkscrewing career. It's truly impossible to predict his next move.

That boldness in choosing material, and his colourful life behind the camera, might suggest that Brolin is someone who breezes through life with Thanos-like confidence. In fact, he's a self-styled "office building of sensitivities", as prone to self-doubt as any of us. He's also a terrific person to interview, with zero pat answers and a willingness to say exactly what's on his mind. So, on a Zoom call from New York, he discussed the fears that sometimes assail him and how he's putting them in their place.

**Your memoir opens with a quote from Glasgow street graffiti: "You can't ignore the animals in your bones."**
We actually made a shirt out of it, and not even to promote the book, just because I love the quote that much. It's kind of a double entendre for me, because I was raised around wild animals. My mother was an animal activist. We had wolves and mountain lions. We had every type of animal.

**You've mentioned before that you helped birth lion cubs. That sounds terrifying.**
Many times. It's only terrifying because the mother doesn't want, necessarily, help from a human. Especially a small boy. (*Laughs*) Which I don't blame her for. But no, I birthed many, many animals, and I didn't have a choice. With my mother — and I love her very much, and I miss her very much — choice wasn't an option. And that's a very country thing that still exists. We still have a place in [Californian city] Paso Robles, and we go up there, and the mentality is like that. "You're going to help me farm today." "You're going to round up some cattle today." "You got bucked off the horse? Well, get back on the horse."

**I have to ask: which part of the lion-birthing experience were you in charge of?**
I wasn't in charge; I was sitting there, rolling out... I did it with horses too. I mean, it sounds so primitive and awful now, but if that foal wasn't getting out, you have to put a chain around those legs. It was all in the same mentality as Reggie — my mom befriended a chimpanzee, who would sit and watch Schwarzenegger movies with her on TV. And when Reggie got spinal meningitis about a year after my mom died, in our panic we took him to a regular hospital, which is something I was fairly versed in with my mother. How to manipulate a doctor out of that hospital, put that chimpanzee on a gurney in the parking lot, and have that doctor work on the chimpanzee. And it didn't work. We kept him alive a little bit longer. He was in the SUV and I was holding him, spooning him when he took his last breath. Which all sounds super-weird to somebody like you, but it was just a Tuesday for me.

**While we're on the subject of animals, Chris Pratt once told me he based his character in *Jurassic World* on dolphins. Do you ever draw on the animal kingdom when you build a character?**
(*Laughs*) He's a funny dude. I've used a lot of animals. I've never used a dolphin. It's like *True Grit* — when you look at that character we came up with (*outlaw Tom Chaney*), that's very animalistic, very feral. You know, acting is a profession of humiliation and embarrassment. There's nothing cool about it — nothing. And if you're really doing your job, you're gonna live in that world of foolishness and do whatever you can in order for a character's trajectory to be dynamic. If you've got to be a fucking tree or a wolf or a dolphin, if you've got to do art in your trailer and only use green, just paint one green canvas after the other. If that creates something you're going to go into the scene with, and you're just going to be blinking a lot because all you can see is green... it might create something interesting.

**Is there one seemingly crazy thing you've done to get yourself into the zone?**
Early on I did a lot of crazy things. I would scream and slap myself, I would not talk to certain actors, all that kind of thing. And I've seen younger actors do it now. Like, I just had an experience of an actor doing it with me and I love him — he's a wonderful actor — but I did want to slap him. It's annoying, but I respect it. Because you're really just experimenting. For me, I found that the more positively engaged ›

**Left:** As shady TV exec Dan Killian in the upcoming *The Running Man*.

Leather jacket: Zadig & Voltaire; Sweater: Aya Muse; T-shirt: James Perse; Trousers: Nili Lotan; Boots: Yohji Yamamoto; Rings: thick silver band: Pianegonda, thin and gunmetal bands: Brosway

I am, then I really enjoy going into a deep, dark place because I haven't been there. I get more of a reaction from the other actor, too, because they're like, "Oh shit, I didn't know you were this dark."

**Because you've switched suddenly, in the moment.**
Yeah, I find acting in that way is much more effective. How can I be as naked and raw as possible? Because if you're doing a scene, that's the only thing that matters: your reactions. Somebody just mentioned the other day, "I watched *American Gangster* and when you opened the door and the car blew up, [your] reaction was so wild." I said, "Yeah, because he didn't tell me he was going to do it!" And Ridley [Scott], working with him almost 20 years later [on next year's sci-fi movie *The Dog Stars*], he goes, "Do you remember when I did that thing to you? Remember how scared you got?" I said, "Yes, I remember, and I was thankful for it." It's very rare that you get to react in real time and authentically.

**In an interview from 2007, you said that you got paranoid doing certain scenes as you fretted the audience would lose interest. Is that something you've gotten past?**
I've gotten less worried. I'm more in "fuck it" mode, you know? *Wake Up Dead Man*, I had long speeches in front of very good actors, from a pulpit, which is even more unnerving. And then in *Running Man*, we had to do a thing — there were long speeches and I had to do them into camera, because I'm on a screen that [Glen Powell's hero Ben Richards] is seeing. And I didn't realise that — when Edgar said, "We've got to do this down the pipe," I was like, "What? These long fucking speeches, and I've got to be looking at my own reflection?" But we figured it out. There's this reflective added thing that you can put on a lens, where I can be looking down the lens and actually looking at Glen next to the camera. (*Pause*) I remember doing one of those speeches on *Running Man*, and I thought peripherally I saw somebody look at their watch. It was my sensitivity — I found out later they weren't. But you know, that's when shit goes bad. That's when you realise how human you are. You're just like, "Yeah, people are bored. I suck. They found me out. And this is probably the last film I'm ever going to be asked to do."

**"I FEEL A LOT OF FEAR. AND I LIKE THAT."**

Top and trousers: Yohji Yamamoto; Trench: Varvatos; Boots: Thursday

**Left:** As tormented dad Archer Graff in *Weapons*. **Below left, top to bottom:** 2010's *True Grit*; In the upcoming *Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery*.

**Does that happen often?**
I went through a thing. It was a movie I was very happy about, and a filmmaker I am very close with, and other actors who I was very happy to be working with. But I was in the middle of a scene and I heard very clearly: "This is so dumb." Nobody said it. This was something that was said in my brain. And it didn't have to do with me being on drugs or being tired. It threw me into about a year-and-a-half-long spiral into whether I wanted to do this anymore or not.

**How did you get past that?**
All I had to do was go back and watch things that moved me. Like, behind the scenes of *Raging Bull* and *The Godfather* and movies that I really love. I think I spent four hours watching behind the scenes of Criterion DVDs and shit. All it took was getting into the nectar of it again, which I had been living outside of for a little bit too long.

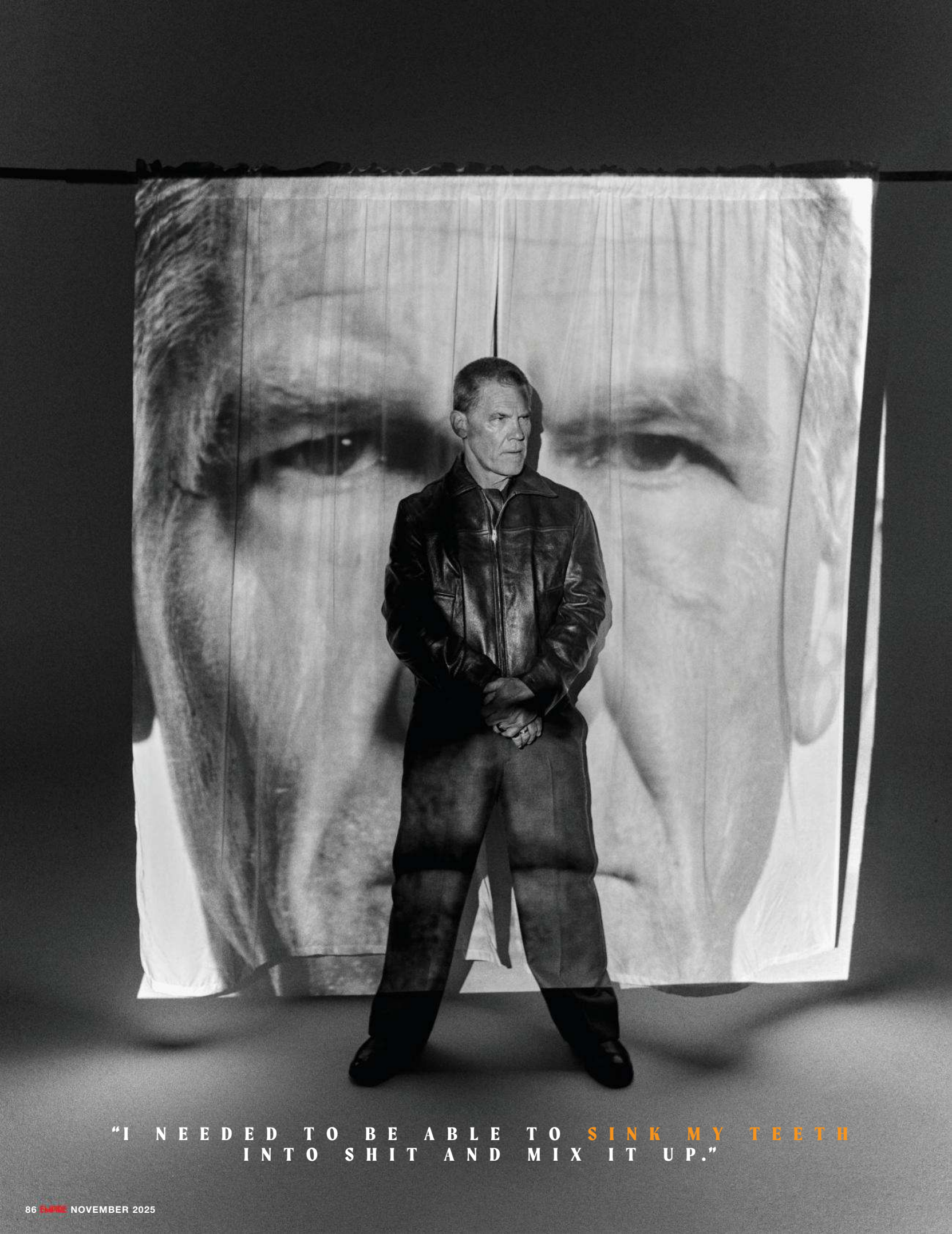
**Did you change up your acting style too?**
For *Whalefall* (*a 2026 drama about a scuba diver, played by Austin Abrams, who gets swallowed by a whale; Brolin reportedly plays his father*), I called a buddy of mine, Oscar Isaac, who I'd made fun of on set for having an acting coach, and I said, "What was that acting coach that you had on set?" And he was like, "I've actually found a new one, and she's a Jungian dream analyst." Already I'm cringing. I'm like, "What the fuck am I doing?" You know, it's like Pratt and dolphins. Then I went to see this girl, Kim Gillingham, and we spent three days doing a lot of writing, a lot of daydreaming, and it was the most incredible three days. Just to fucking mix it up, not to rely on a technique that I default to and be like, "Oh, this is what I do." And, "When are we going on our trip? Are we going first class? Is there going to be a greeter?" You know, the business starts to overwhelm, and you forget what it's like to be in black-box theatre and just be stupidly creative. She asked me afterwards, "Do you feel like it helped the role?" And I said, "I don't care. It got me fucking jazzed again." I haven't seen it yet, *Whalefall*, but I felt the same way with *Weapons*. *Weapons* was the beginning of that.

**In what way?**
I thought [Zach Cregger's previous film] *Barbarian* was really good, but I didn't quite understand it. Like, "Is this really good or really bad?" I called my daughter and she was like, "Oh my God, it's one of the best movies of the last five years." Her husband went off on this whole diatribe on why the movie was great. And then when I met with [Cregger], it sealed the deal. He was very honest, and you don't get that often. That meeting was very naked. [Previously] I had just taken a chance on somebody who I liked very much, but the movie didn't turn out very well. And I was pissed, I was bummed. But what are you going to do, man? I want to go for the bigger swing. You don't do [cancelled Prime Video sci-fi series] *Outer Range* after not doing TV for 20 years, about a hole in a ranch, if you don't. Because it's more fun for me.

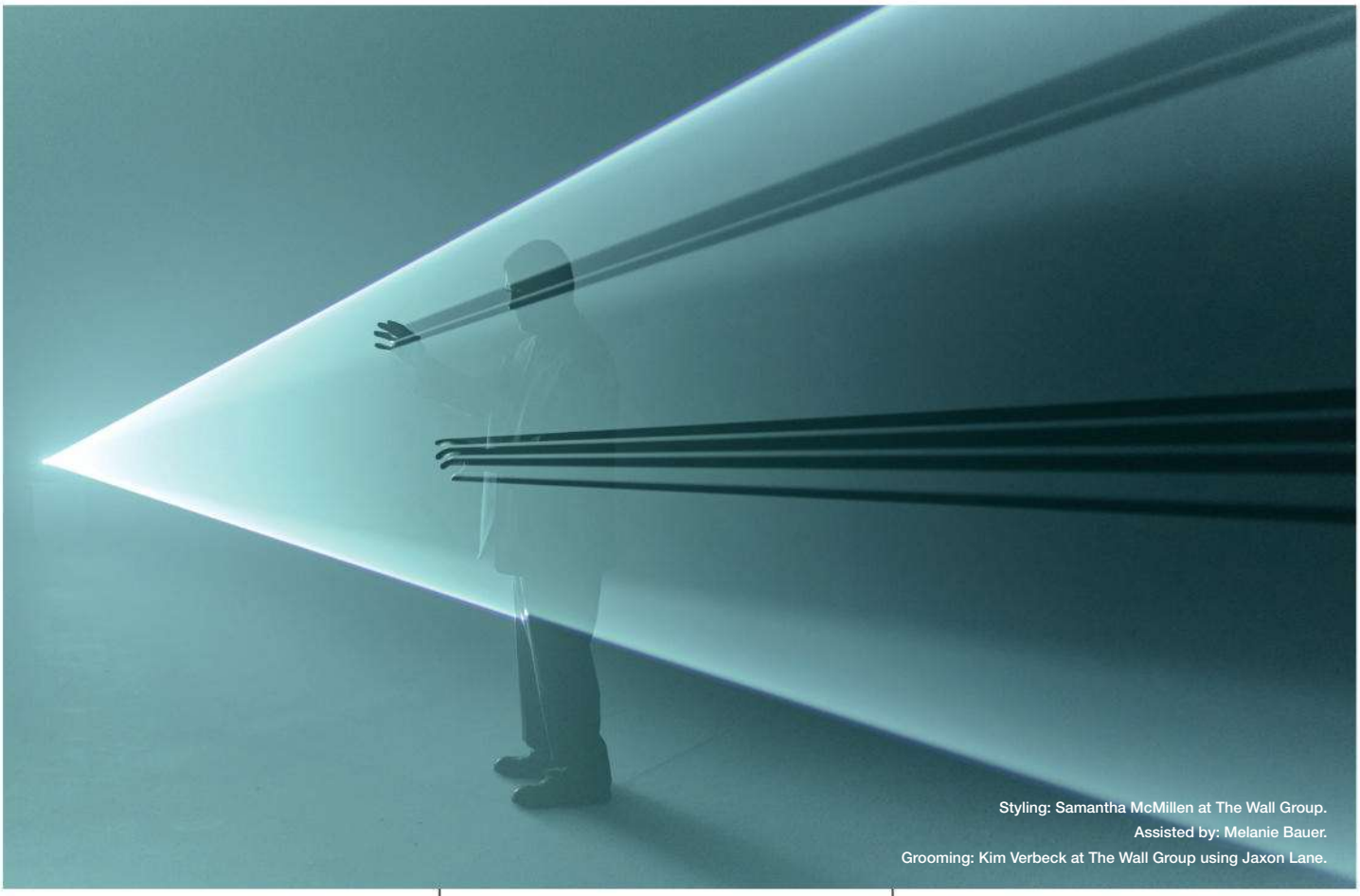
**Are those big swings fear-inducing?**
I feel a lot of fear. And I like that. I mean, if it's the right fear. I used to head towards the wrong fear, a lot. If it's like, "This role scares the shit out of me. I don't know if I'm capable of doing this," it's a good thing.

**You used to feel like an outsider in Hollywood. Do you still?**
I think my decisions are outsider decisions. Now I'm going to make decisions based on whatever drum beat that it is I want to adhere to inside. So I do *Weapons*. And a few friends have said to me, "I was really surprised to see you in this type of movie." I go, "That's great." Because a good movie is a good movie is a good movie.

**You play a priest in *Wake Up Dead Man*. Back in 1989, you also played a priest in your first-ever stage play, and went to Ireland to talk to real ones for research. How did that go?**
It didn't go very well. (*Laughs*) Because I was too scared to talk to the priests, so I ended up just walking around Ireland with a cheap tweed coat that I had bought and whatever I felt was an Irish hat at the time. It was really lonely. Did I get anything out of it? I don't know, maybe. I wanted to be Daniel Day-Lewis. I actually saw *My Left Foot* on that trip and it blew my mind. That was like a whole other level that I didn't understand existed, and I wanted to find that, ›



"I NEEDED TO BE ABLE TO SINK MY TEETH INTO SHIT AND MIX IT UP."



Styling: Samantha McMillen at The Wall Group.
Assisted by: Melanie Bauer.
Grooming: Kim Verbeck at The Wall Group using Jaxon Lane.

Opposite: Leather jacket: COS; Shirt: Lemaire; Trousers: Burberry; Boots: Doucal. This page: Jacket: Fear Of God; Shirt: Prada; Trousers: Burberry; Boots: Doucal. Rings for both looks: thick silver band: Planegonda, thin and gunmetal bands: Brosway. Additional imagery: Alamy, Netflix, Paramount, Warner Bros.

whatever that was. And I think I have tried to find it for decades, and still am trying to find it, you know? I probably will forever try to be finding it.

**I'm assuming you didn't go back there to prep for *Wake Up Dead Man*?**
I did not. I did shoot it in England, though, so I was close. My wife reminded me that a year before that I had said I wanted to play a priest — and then a year later I *was* playing a priest. And one that was I really scared of, and a filmmaker that made me nervous, in a good way. Like, Rian has incredible fucking command, and I don't know how, because there's nothing threatening about him. Zero. I spend a lot of time with a lot of threatening-looking people, and he's not one of them, and yet I found myself perpetually wanting to please him. So I put a lot of work into that thing.

**With *Running Man*, you're playing a total bastard. How do you slide into something like that?**
Emotional ruthlessness. Obviously there's something of that in me, or I've been around that. You know, there was somebody who came on the set of *Gangster Squad*, we were in the park, and I think he was a little drunk. A PA came up to him and said, "You know, you can't be here." And he just created a stink. He started really treating the PA like shit. And then whatever intelligence I have was fully utilised to make him feel as humiliated as possible. Because I felt that he had wronged somebody that was too scared to stand up for themselves because they didn't want to be

**Above, top to bottom:** With Oscar Isaac in *Dune* (2021); As CIA agent Matt Graver in *Sicario* (2015).

fired. So you just use that. Whatever part of me exists like that, and then you just make it worse. (*Laughs*)

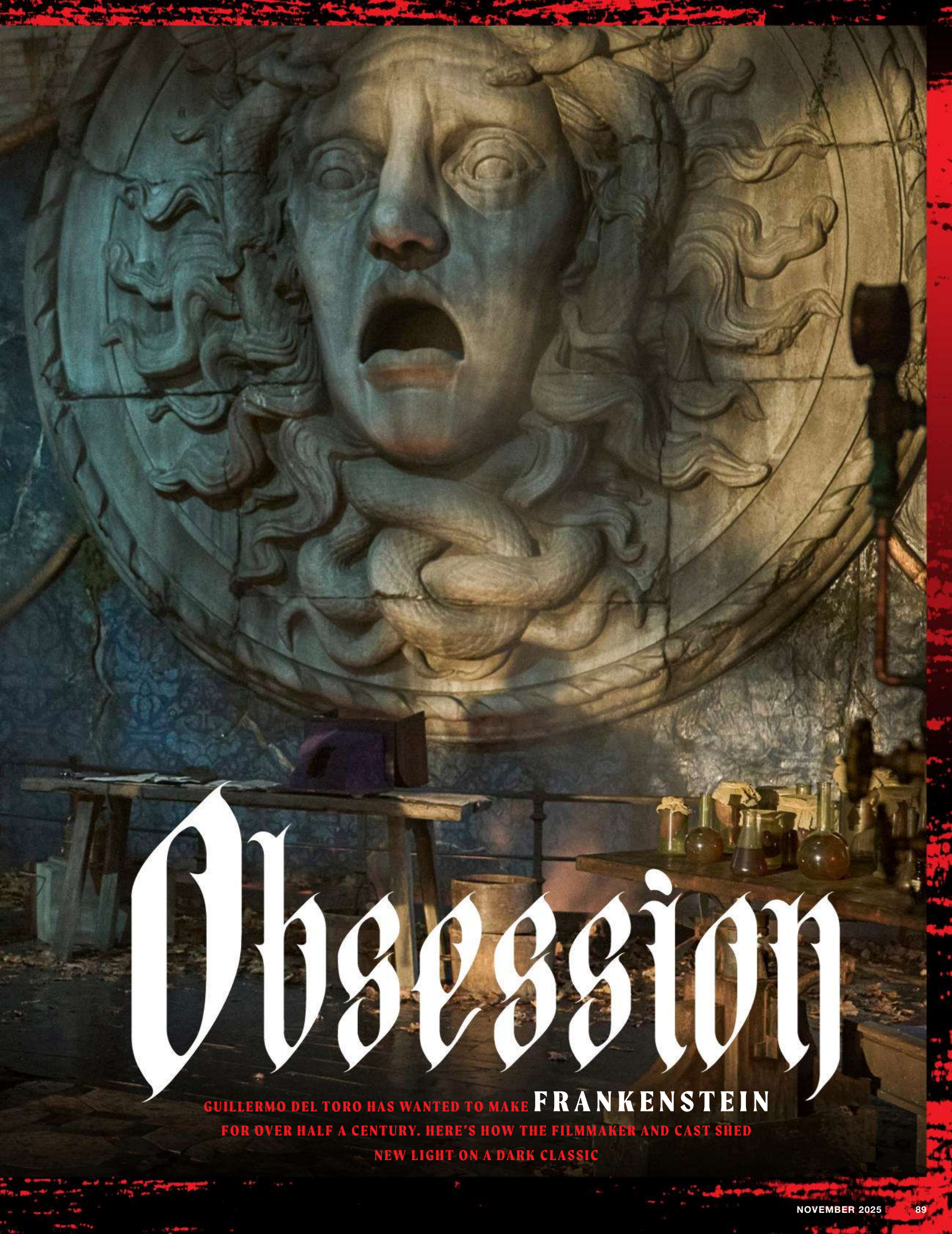
**It feels like you're on a great run. Does it seem like an extraordinarily fertile time, from your perspective?**
Yeah. And I can admit it now. I can admit that I'm excited about *Weapons*, and I'm glad that it has its own life. I'm excited about the five movies I did from *Dune* [2] to *Dune* [3]. I'm excited about what we're negotiating for January. But there was a moment... I called my agent and had a tiny bit of a freak-out, which I don't normally have. "Why are we doing all these smaller parts? Is this the end of my career?" All this stuff. It lasted a few minutes, and it didn't need for him to say anything, but it made me start thinking. It made me shift my perspective. And I was like, "These are the roles that I've been looking for. It doesn't matter how big or small they are — they're with great filmmakers, and they're great roles in great stories." This year has been a very special year, and I don't know how all these movies will play out financially, but I needed this year badly. Meaning, I needed to be able to sink my teeth into shit and mix it up.

**You nearly turned down *Sicario*, too, because of the size of that role. That must be an intense worry: that if you're not top of the cast-list, it's all going to go away.**
(*Nods*) And it never worked for me. That perspective and that narrative never worked for me, ever. It should be as far away from my psyche as possible. It's not what I should be focused on. My thing is not: how do I be as famous as I can possibly be? There's some gift of longevity I've been given, because I have a penchant to do what others would perceive as [going to] fuck up my career again and again and again and again. (*Laughs*) I do all the wrong things that are right for me.

*THE RUNNING MAN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 14. *WAKE UP DEAD MAN: A KNIVES OUT MYSTERY* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 28 AND ON NETFLIX FROM DECEMBER 12

# Magnificent

WORDS
**CHRIS HEWITT**



# Obsession

GUILLERMO DEL TORO HAS WANTED TO MAKE **FRANKENSTEIN** FOR OVER HALF A CENTURY. HERE'S HOW THE FILMMAKER AND CAST SHED NEW LIGHT ON A DARK CLASSIC

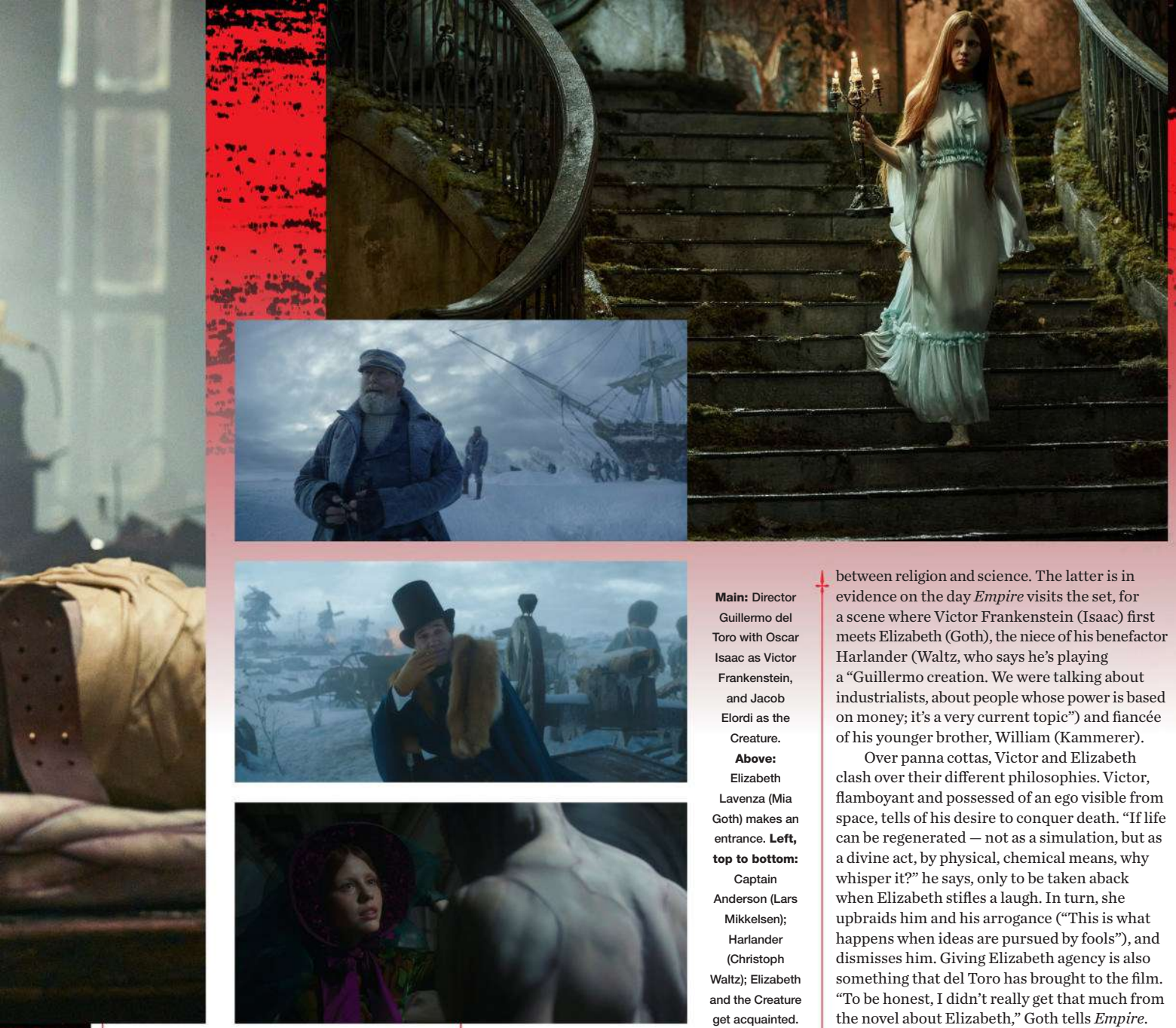
PETERBOROUGH IS a nice-enough city. It's got a cathedral, a population of around 200,000 people, and a football team hovering around the lower reaches of League One. But, with all due respect to the good folk who live there, it doesn't feel like the sort of place where a lifelong dream comes true for an Oscar-winning filmmaker.

Yet, on a sunny September day last year, *Empire* popped along to Burghley House, a 16th-century country estate (with grounds designed by Capability Brown, no less), found just ten miles northwest of the city centre, to see just that. For, inside, around a large dining table, Oscar Isaac, Mia Goth, Christoph Waltz and Felix Kammerer are having a spirited exchange about the limits, ethical and otherwise, of science. And, just a few feet away, watching them on a monitor at video village, sits said Oscar-winning filmmaker, Guillermo del Toro, looking like the cat that got the cream. As well he should. For this scene, and others that he's marshalled over the past few weeks, marks the culmination of that lifelong dream, an odyssey of obsession that has gripped him for over five decades. At long, long last, he's making *Frankenstein* come to life.

**IN 1971, WHEN HE WAS JUST SEVEN** years old, growing up in Guadalajara, Mexico, del Toro experienced a double bill that blew his mind and changed his life. First, he was introduced to James Whale's 1931 Universal horror classic, *Frankenstein*. Colin Clive, as mad scientist Henry (changed from the novel's Victor) Frankenstein, yelling, "IT'S ALIVE!" as he reanimates a corpse comprised of component parts. Boris Karloff as The Monster, unforgettable with heavy-lidded eyes, a forehead roughly the size and shape of Beachy Head, and bolts sticking out of his neck.

Secondly, the intellectually and artistically curious boy ran out to find Whale's source material, an 1818 novel written by Mary Shelley. He found a paperback copy on a rack in a supermarket. He still has it. And he remembers the shock he felt when he read it. "I said, 'My God, this is not the movie,'" he tells *Empire*, just over five decades later. A fire was lit, a resolve was forged. He would one day adapt the book. "It's a movie I wanted to make before I had a camera," he says. "When I was very, very young, I thought movies just existed somewhere. And then I understood people made them. And I really thought, 'Well, I'm gonna make *Frankenstein*.'"

And, after a fashion, he did. As he built his extraordinary career, del Toro has worked something of the DNA of Shelley's story, and the thematic preoccupations that have gripped him, into almost everything he's made. Yes, even *Pacific Rim* (and, in fact, you could argue, especially *Pacific Rim*). His affinity for the Creature, cruelly abandoned by his creator and tossed headlong into a world that sees only the monstrous side of him, and reacts accordingly, can be seen in the likes of *Hellboy*, *The Shape Of Water* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. His love of the Gothic









**Main:** Director Guillermo del Toro with Oscar Isaac as Victor Frankenstein, and Jacob Elordi as the Creature. **Above:** Elizabeth Lavenza (Mia Goth) makes an entrance. **Left, top to bottom:** Captain Anderson (Lars Mikkelsen); Harlander (Christoph Waltz); Elizabeth and the Creature get acquainted.

is there in *Crimson Peak* and his 1993 debut, *Cronos*. "If you see *Cronos*, which I did in my twenties," he says, "there's a lot of intentionally trying to make Federico Luppi look a little bit like Christopher Lee. *Blade II* is the monster coming back to the Father, and having a very brief and violent dialogue with him. This is a streak that is in many of the movies."

After developing a version (at, of all places, Universal) in the mid noughties that stalled, he filed *Frankenstein* away. Until a couple of years ago, when he had just finished his stop-motion-animation adaptation of *Pinocchio*, another novel which he says is "embedded in my DNA", and which brought him another Oscar, following on from the impressive haul garnered by *The Shape Of Water* in 2017. *Pinocchio* and del Toro's anthology series, *Cabinet Of Curiosities*, had been made for Netflix, whose chairman at that time was Scott Stuber. Who had been involved with del Toro's earlier *Frankenstein* at Universal. You can see where this is going. Namely, a pitch meeting with Netflix's Ted Sarandos. "It took all of three minutes for Ted to say yes to *Pinocchio*," laughs del Toro. "All of three minutes for him to say yes to *Cabinet Of Curiosities*, and all of three minutes for him to say yes to *Frankenstein*."

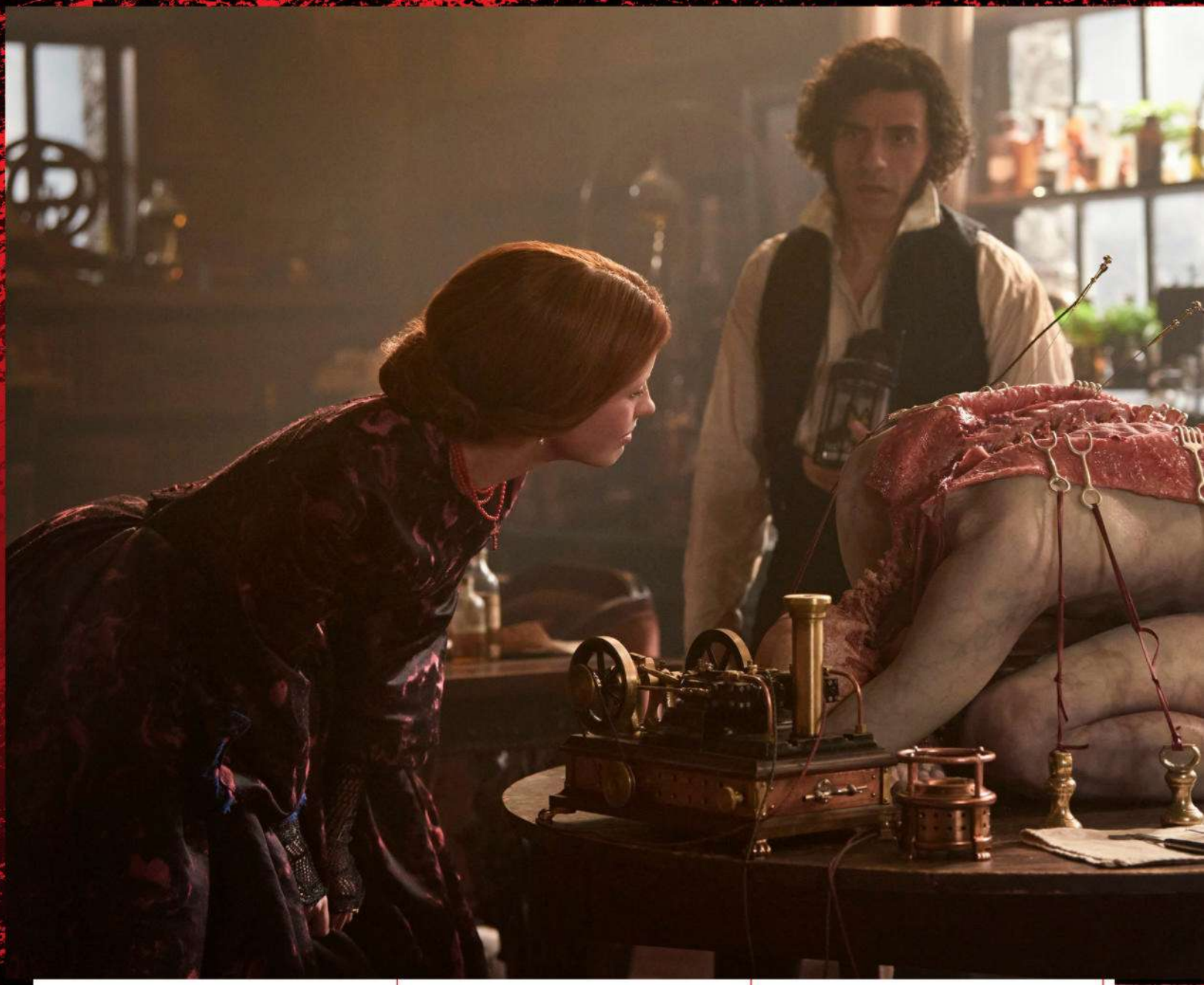
**EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON,** they say. And del Toro reckons that had Universal taken three minutes to say yes to *Frankenstein* all those years ago, he wouldn't have been ready. "I don't think I would have understood it the way I understand it now," he says. "I don't think it would have been morally, ethically, spiritually, what it is today."

The man who made *Cronos* needed time. Time to grow as a person, and as a filmmaker. Time to further appreciate the nuance and complexity of the themes he wished to explore in Shelley's text. "The myth of *Frankenstein* is so complex that it can apply to anything from AI to the artistic process to personal growth to the myth of the doppelgänger," says del Toro. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Del Toro's movie also examines ageing, mortality, and the relationship between religion and science. The latter is in evidence on the day *Empire* visits the set, for a scene where Victor Frankenstein (Isaac) first meets Elizabeth (Goth), the niece of his benefactor Harlander (Waltz, who says he's playing a "Guillermo creation. We were talking about industrialists, about people whose power is based on money; it's a very current topic") and fiancée of his younger brother, William (Kammerer).

Over panna cottas, Victor and Elizabeth clash over their different philosophies. Victor, flamboyant and possessed of an ego visible from space, tells of his desire to conquer death. "If life can be regenerated — not as a simulation, but as a divine act, by physical, chemical means, why whisper it?" he says, only to be taken aback when Elizabeth stifles a laugh. In turn, she upbraids him and his arrogance ("This is what happens when ideas are pursued by fools"), and dismisses him. Giving Elizabeth agency is also something that del Toro has brought to the film. "To be honest, I didn't really get that much from the novel about Elizabeth," Goth tells *Empire*. "Guillermo really filled the character out in the script, and made it his own." A sentiment that perfectly sums up this take on the monster myth.

**IT'S NOT CALLED *MARY SHELLEY'S Frankenstein*** (lest audiences endure painful flashbacks to the Kenneth Branagh-Robert De Niro abomination from 1994); this is very much Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein*. The director has been faithful to the book in many ways ("There are many things I always wanted to see in a *Frankenstein* movie that I had never seen"), but he is also ploughing his own furrow, and exploring deeply personal preoccupations.

Chief among those is the film's central conflict. Yes, Victor and his Creature are creator and creation. But they're also, in a sense, father and son. And the film's codename, employed during filming to throw nosey parkers off the scent, hints heavily at that: 'The Prodigal Father'. "Everybody talks about the prodigal son, because there is that fabulous parable," says del Toro. "But very rarely do fathers return to being fathers. And my own journey, ›



as a human being, is of a prodigal father. Film is a very jealous profession with personal life. It takes you away, and it takes a toll. That toll weighed heavily on me as a human being, and I wanted to make the movie about that."

Del Toro sees himself as both Victor and the Creature, as the father and the son. As such, he has divided the film into two halves, one told from Victor's point of view, the other from the Creature's. "It's about seeing yourself as both a father and a son," he explains. "I am a little bit of Victor. I'm a little bit of the Creature." It's also about del Toro's relationship with his own father, the late Federico del Toro Torres, who was kidnapped for 72 days in 1997. "Many years after the kidnapping I said to him, 'You have to tell me what happened to you,'" recalls del Toro. "And it took a lot of effort, and it produced a really moving day. It moved the needle for me. I think movies are biography, and this one is basically this moment of reflection."

Talking of fathers brought del Toro to his Victor Frankenstein, when he sat down with Oscar Isaac for a general meeting, and left it an hour later vowing to write Victor for the actor. "We sat in his kitchen, and we ate Cuban food, and we talked about our dads," says Isaac. "We talked about growing up with these figures of incredible importance in our lives, and all of the pain and the joy and the legacy, and that incredible, difficult, strange journey that everybody has with their parents. And at one point, after a long silence, he looked up and said, 'I think you need to be my Victor Frankenstein.'"

Finding the son, though, was another story altogether.

## A COMMON MISCONCEPTION, POINTED

out by pedants and pub quizmasters (as if they're not the same thing), is that the Creature's name is Frankenstein. It isn't. For a while, though, it was Garfield. As in, Andrew, for whom del Toro had written the role. Until, with around nine weeks to go and sets under construction in Toronto, Garfield dropped out. For once, our old chum, creative differences, wasn't to blame. Instead, del Toro says that the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes of 2023 meant Garfield's schedule became unworkable. "It became clear that this was not going to work," he says. "We had to recast." It was not a time for panicking. A lifelong dream hinged on del Toro's choice. In the end, the eyes had it. "The way I cast, I cast eyes," explains del Toro. "I always look at the eyes of the actor and say, 'Can they give me that emotion?' Oscar's eyes, I immediately knew he could play earnest or mad and brilliant. Jacob's eyes, I immediately knew he could play innocence."

The Jacob in question is Elordi, the 28-year-old Australian actor who broke through in HBO's *Euphoria* and Emerald Fennell's *Saltburn*, and who grew up, horror-movie-mad, hoping to work one day with Guillermo del Toro. "When I was going from slashers to creature films, I picked up *Pan's Labyrinth* and saw the Pale Man on the back [cover] with the eyes in his hands," recalls Elordi. "And something shifted." So when his agent called him and told him that he was in the frame for *Frankenstein*, it felt like fate. "Quite arrogantly, when the film was announced, I had,

**Clockwise from main:** Elizabeth is not fazed by Victor's experiments; Claire Frankenstein (Mia Goth) and young Victor (Christian Convery); William Frankenstein (Felix Kammerer); The Creature meets a blind man (David Bradley).

for some reason, run my mouth to my agent, saying, 'I would love to make that movie,'" laughs Elordi. "Then the years passed, and he called me and said, 'I have a script for you. It's Guillermo del Toro.' I said, 'Get fucked!' Like, 'You're joking!' I thought it might be to play a tree or a horse or something. Then I asked, 'Is it to play the Creature?'" A few hours later, he was on a call with del Toro. "I think we were plugged into the same source."

When it came to the day job of Creaturing, Elordi wasn't put off by the daunting hours of make-up, which present the Creature not so much as a patchwork quilt of ragged stitches, but as an elegant creation, meticulously jigsawed together by Victor. "On our first phone call, Guillermo said, 'It's not a make-up process, it's not hours in the chair. It's your time to pass over into the creature,'" says Elordi. "And I took that really seriously. I couldn't have asked for a better make-up. You can really see the human being in it, but it's also so shockingly beautiful."

*Empire* has been lucky enough to see the end result, and Elordi and del Toro, in tandem, have created a Creature that is very much a universal monster; an elemental force, possessed of incredible strength and rage, but also an enormous capacity for love as he evolves from child to man. "I was incredibly impressed," says Isaac of working with Elordi. "I was not like that when I was 27. I was a mess. I'm still a mess. The way Victor starts to treat the Creature was dark and ugly, but what was beautiful was Jacob, in his flexibility, was able to tap into the joy happening around the set."

Perhaps the greatest achievement of all, when you look at Elordi's Creature, or listen to his soft burr, tinged with shades of Yorkshire, is that you don't think of the nearly innumerable actors who've played the role before him, whether it's Boris Karloff, or Christopher Lee, or — God help us — Robert De Niro. This Creature is truly alive.

**NOW THAT DEL TORO HAS FINALLY** brought *Frankenstein* forth into the world, it begs the question: what's next? When you've fulfilled a lifelong dream, what do you do then? It's a question that del Toro has pondered long and hard. Four years ago, he had three movies left on his all-time bucket list: *Pinocchio*, *Frankenstein*, and his take on H.P. Lovecraft's *At The Mountains Of Madness*. Now, with two of those ticked off, it seems fair to assume that the third should follow soon. But you know that old saying: if you assume, you make an ass out of U and H.P.. "The one that's on the bucket list that I think is gonna stay there is *Mountains,*" says del Toro. "It's too big, too crazy, too R-rated, I guess. And to be completely candid, I don't know that I want to do it after this."

Because for del Toro, *Frankenstein* is the culmination of everything he's worked towards. "This movie closes the cycle," he says. "If you look at the lineage, from *Cronos* to *The Devil's Backbone*, to *Pan's Labyrinth* to *Crimson Peak* to this, this is an evolution of a certain type of aesthetic, and a certain type of rhythm, and a certain type of empathy. I feel like I need a change." As Michael Stipe once sang, go build yourself another dream. Perhaps one that bypasses Peterborough.

Del Toro is careful not to say what form that change may take. He even acknowledges that there might not be a change. "You never know," he says. "The day after tomorrow, I may want to do *Jekyll & Hyde*, or whatever. But right now, my desire is to try and do something very different."

Now that he's entered his sixties, which he did while making *Frankenstein*, del Toro is acutely aware that time is not on his side. "I'm in my last quarter," he says. If he is to embark upon a new cycle, it will come with very specific criteria. "Is it emotional to you? Is it important for you? Is it important *enough*?" he muses. "Time is important for me. Is this movie worth paying [for] with that time?" Was *Frankenstein*, *Empire* asks? He doesn't even hesitate. "This is," he says. "Undoubtedly."

***FRANKENSTEIN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 17 AND ON NETFLIX FROM NOVEMBER 7**

# final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

NOVEMBER 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

# Lord of the jungle

## *JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH* DIRECTOR GARETH EDWARDS ON HOW LIFE FOUND A WAY

WORDS **JAMES DYER**

*EMPIRE* IS TALKING TO Gareth Edwards in a toilet. It's certainly on-brand for a *Jurassic* movie, but we're here not hiding from an angry T-Rex, but rather a gaggle of influencers and publicists on the final day of Edwards' *Jurassic World Rebirth* publicity tour. It is, it should be said, a particularly nice toilet, one situated in a Thai hotel that recently stood in for the White Lotus, but there's no getting away from the fact that we're currently sitting next to a khazi and chatting about dinosaurs.

A thoughtful and somewhat introverted filmmaker, Edwards — the British director of *Jurassic World Rebirth* (and *Rogue One*, and *Godzilla*, and *The Creator*, and his astonishing breakthrough, *Monsters*) — finds the relentless barrage of media attention challenging ("I feel like Guantanamo Bay could learn a lot from a publicity tour"), but *Empire* has the distinction of being his final interview not just of the day, but of the entire tour. And so, after hours of four-minute on-camera chats, we've sought refuge away from the cameras, crowds and hungry mosquitoes in this well-appointed porcelain panic room, for a deeper dive into his *Rebirth* rebirth — the film has grossed over $860 million worldwide.

**We're hiding in a toilet at the very end of your publicity run. Is it fair to say this is the part of filmmaking you enjoy the least?**
When I was a kid I always wanted to be a film director. But you'd see behind-the-scenes footage of Steven Spielberg making *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and he's so confident and full of energy and very American in his persona. I would look at that stuff and go, "Oh my God, that's not me. I'm really quiet and in my own head a lot. Maybe I can't be a film director." And then I would watch the making of *Star Wars* and see George Lucas and go, "Oh, thank God." But doing publicity tours is not really what I'm built to do.

**You mention Spielberg, who was a huge influence on you as a filmmaker and with whom you worked closely on this project. Was that a surreal experience? Especially given how much you reference his work in the film.**
Yes, it's very, very weird. We showed him a cut of the film and he called us up — it's very intimidating looking at your phone, waiting for it to ring and it's going to be Steven Spielberg telling you what he thinks of a *Jurassic* film. He and David Koepp [writer of *Rebirth* and the original *Jurassic Park*] went through this list of

**Above:** Kings of the world: Titanosauruses put on a show in *Jurassic World Rebirth*. **Far left:** Director Gareth Edwards gets stuck in. **Left:** Scarlett Johansson as covert-operations expert Zora Bennett.

notes and I was like, "Okay, that's good, I agree with that, that's cool." And at the very end, the last note was, "Oh yeah, and take out all the references and Easter eggs about *Jurassic*." And I felt really deflated. I thought, "Okay, I'll do it and see if it works." So I took them out and I felt sad about it. But I showed them and thankfully they felt the same way. Then we probably put the right amount back in.

**Life finds a way...**

Yes. The director's cut finds a way. What's really interesting is Steven's very humble, because he doesn't want to reference his own films, but equally he doesn't assume you've seen all of his work. There was one point where he was talking about the Mosasaurus sequence and his analogy, which I thought was very good, was how being a filmmaker is a bit like being a chef, but the ›

**Above left:** LeClerc (Bechir Sylvain) comes face to face with the Quetzalcoatlus. **Above right:** Teresa (Luna Blaise) versus T-Rex. **Below:** The Mosasaurus makes a splash.

difference is that the audience should leave hungry, not full. Then he starts to explain why that works and he uses *Jaws* as a reference, but he'll start explaining the scene in *Jaws* and the fact the shark didn't work and you want to interrupt him and go "I know! I've read every book, I've watched the movie 50 times!"

**You've squirrelled away so many Spielberg nods in this film, from Quint's footboard to a Devil's Tower keyring, but one that really stands out is when Jonathan Bailey holds up the Quetzalcoatlus egg just like Indy with the idol.**
That sequence was actually written as being in a nest on the edge of a cliff and I just couldn't figure out how to do anything exciting in this nest. I thought, "What if it was a cave or maybe even an Inca cave?" Because I'd pitched an original opening where there were tribespeople witnessing the destruction of the forest as we're building the lab. It felt very thematic, but that didn't make it in. But because that was on my mind, I then thought, "These people are probably Incas." And the second you do an Inca carving, without realising it, you're instantly in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. What was fun was when Frank Marshall, the producer of *Raiders*, walked on set, looked around and went, "Oh!"

**It says *Jurassic World* on the poster, but this feels more like a *Jurassic Park* film. Not just because it's shot on 35mm, but because it leans more into the horror aspects of those early films.**
Right. When the screenplay arrived, it didn't say *Jurassic World* on the cover. And that's what excited me, because it felt like that makes total sense — you've had a trilogy of *Jurassic Park*, you've had a trilogy of *Jurassic World*, and now a new trilogy.

**What did it say?**
I've said I won't say. I'll let David Koepp or Spielberg say, but it definitely implied a new chapter. It's very hard; you've got the fear that it's going to seem like a little offshoot, a 'diet' version for streaming or something, so I totally understand the desire to want to keep *Jurassic World* as the title.

**There's still some reluctance to label *Jurassic Park* as a horror film, despite much evidence to the contrary.**
Well, there are a lot of jokes in *Jurassic Park*, but you would never walk away from that movie and describe it as a comedy. Equally, I think there's one of the most scary scenes in the history of cinema in that movie, but you wouldn't describe it as a horror movie exactly. So they go with the action-adventure thing because you know at some point you want kids to turn up. But in its heart I would joke that it's a horror movie in the witness-protection programme, pretending it's a family adventure.

**There's a saying about never meeting your idols, but the same caveat should probably apply to joining a franchise that you deeply love. *Rogue One* wasn't the smoothest experience for you, so how much late-night pacing did you do, wondering if you'd made the right decision signing on to make a *Jurassic* film?**
On any movie, and this was one too, if there was a magic button in the middle of production and at any point you could just walk up to it and press it and a big alarm went off and there were no consequences, you just got to leave and walk away... on every movie, I would press it at least three times. There's always a point where you hit rock bottom and you feel like you've made a terrible mistake.

**Is that imposter syndrome?**
It's all sorts of things. Things aren't going your way. It's this interesting thing about life where when you don't have a choice, when if you walk away from something you'll probably never work again, it forces you to push through the pain. It's like being an athlete — at the end of the race they don't go, "Oh, it was so much fun!" They'll probably say it was the hardest thing they've ever done, they were in so much pain. But would they want it any other way? So filmmaking, for me it's a bit like that.

**So would you say you love everything about filmmaking except for making films?**
It's the ultimate shit sandwich. I genuinely love conceiving a film — like, I'm on a plane, I put headphones on, I get a little playlist and I look out the window, start dreaming of something, and it's my favourite thing in the world. And I love when someone likes what you've done, when you hit play and someone genuinely really loves it. But everything in the middle is a battle. I don't trust filmmakers who say it's fun. My bad analogy is it's like training to be a surgeon, and making a movie is the day they bring your dying kid in and say you have to operate. And you don't want anyone else to do it, but the idea that you want to cut your kid open and try and save

**Top right:** Johansson in the frame. **Above, top to bottom:** New foe the D-Rex; They're going to need a bigger... everything; Jonathan Bailey as dino-loving paleontologist Dr Henry Loomis.

# "The audience should leave a movie hungry, not full."

them, like... that's fun? But you can't walk out of the hospital and leave and let your kid die; that's not going to happen either. You've got to do it and you won't let anyone else do it.

**Is that feeling less pronounced with something like *The Creator*, which was all your own and not carrying the weight of a franchise?**
I felt more pressure on *The Creator*, weirdly, because it wasn't my money but it was a lot of money and I felt a massive obligation for them to get their money back! I think a lot of these stories about films where they are considered not to have done well enough largely comes down to their budget. At a lower budget they would be success stories. I know you're not supposed to talk about AI in a positive light because it's the dark robot overlord that will kill us all, but I'm slightly excited about some of the opportunities that are going to come. I get excited because surely now you can make a film for the money I made my first movie with and it looks like $200 million. I think the day it's all going to change is the day someone makes a movie for just a handful of change, it looks like $200 million, and makes the money a $200 million movie would make. Then I think it's game over. And that's just a few dice-rolls away. It's in the next year or so — in the next cycle of films. So I think it's never been a better time to be a wannabe filmmaker. It's probably not the best time to be a rotoscope artist, though.

**Do you always see yourself working in film? Or is television an area you'd ever explore?**
Obviously I grew up watching loads of TV, but more recently I don't watch many shows.

**Did you watch *Andor*?**
No. I mean, I'm very happy for everyone, I just don't really watch much streaming, because my favourite part of storytelling is the end. It's the punchline of a joke. I love when it hits credits and the story is told — it's the perfect out, a mic-drop moment. In all my favourite films that moment is beautifully done. Like the end of *Star Wars* when they all applaud, or *Reservoir Dogs* where Harvey Keitel falls out of frame. To me, everything is working backwards from this final feeling, and the ultimate goal of a TV show is not to end but to keep going. It's like someone rambling on in a pub — they realise they've got your attention and they're just stringing it along. *The Twilight Zone* was something I watched loads, I grew up with that. These tiny little ideas that in a weird way were all little ideas for movies. Great little analogies using science-fiction where they're life lessons with little twists. The end is the most important part of a film, closely followed by the very beginning, and then you've just got the problem of all that middle stuff.

**So what's next for you? Will you go back to your favourite part and start dreaming up something new?**
I've been keeping a little collection of thoughts throughout the last year. They've all built up on my phone, and so after this conversation I'm going to fly home and then I get to start tinkering with that stuff. I'm kind of excited about that.

***JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH* IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL, ON DVD AND BLU-RAY SOON**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

# Excalibur

## JOHN BOORMAN'S MAGICAL KING ARTHUR CLASSIC

WORDS **KIM NEWMAN**

JOHN BOORMAN HAD been thinking about the 'Matter Of Britain' for a long time. In 1966, he wrote and directed an episode of the BBC's *Sunday Night* ("the weekly feature series on artists and the arts") called 'The Quarry', subtitled 'Portrait Of A Man As A Paralysed Artist'. Its hero is a sculptor called Arthur King and the setting is Glastonbury. Boorman also worked on a script based on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (with elements of T.H. White's *The Once And Future King* tipped in) in the late 1960s, but was distracted by a related project — a never-filmed version of *The Lord Of The Rings*.

Boorman's Arthurian movie, called 'Merlin' while in development, was back-burnered until *Star Wars* suggested a mass appetite for wizards, swords, quests, and heroes who discover they're destined to be kings. The film industry took a punt that heroic fantasy would be the defining pop genre of the Dungeons-&-Dragons-playing 1980s. *Conan The Barbarian*, another long-in-the-works property, was finally greenlit; majors backed *Clash Of The Titans*, *Dragonslayer* and *Krull*; and quickies like *Hawk The Slayer*, *The Sword And The Sorcerer* and *The Beastmaster* rushed to screens.

Amid so many clashing swords, dark overlords, fulfilled prophecies and stalwart bands of adventurers, 1981's *Excalibur* is marked by underlying seriousness. You wouldn't be surprised to find out Boorman hadn't seen *Star Wars*. His film understands it's based on ancient material of primal import, not 1930s comic strips, film serials or pulp fiction churned out by Americans whose idea of an Arthurian epic was the 'Prince Valiant' newspaper feature.

Like Tolkien, Boorman is deeply invested in Camelot — though, like White, he is attracted to the whimsical, quizzical character of Merlin (Nicol Williamson) more than the noble, flawed, glum triad of Arthur (Nigel Terry), Guenevere (Cherie Lunghi) and Lancelot (Nicholas Clay). The moment of unity around the Round Table is brief. In narrative terms, the idyll lasts years — on screen, it's over with in minutes. Knights almost idly turn on each other and schemers like Arthur's justifiably aggrieved half-sister Morgana (Helen Mirren) take advantage. Sending everyone on a grail quest is just a way of packing a horde of armoured hairies off to grim death, so the film can concentrate on a final stand as Arthur is slain by his evil son by Morgana, Mordred (Robert Addie). Merlin, as so often, stands by and lets the mortals get on with it. Whenever he's asked to do magic, it's for the wrong reasons. Arthur is only born because Uther (Gabriel Byrne) gets Merlin to make Igrayne (Katrine Boorman) think he's her murdered husband (Corin Redgrave). Given Excalibur by the Lady Of The Lake, Arthur uses the enchanted sword to cheat in a fight and breaks the thing. It's mended by magic, but his promises to do better next time ring hollow.

It can't have escaped Boorman's notice that in the years while 'Merlin' was on a shelf, *Monty Python And The Holy Grail* — a pisstake, but a seriously influential one — had come out. Robert Bresson's low-key, mud-level *Lancelot Du Lac* also trod the path, while the UK television series *Arthur Of The Britons* stripped out the magic and attempted a plausible, historical version (like Antoine Fuqua's later *King Arthur*). White's books, source for Disney's cartoon *The Sword In The Stone* and the musical *Camelot*, cast a huge shadow; Williamson is definitely playing White's Merlyn, though his silver skullcap and variable accents also suggest *Flash Gordon* or Peter Sellers in *Lolita* mode. The streak of nuttiness in Boorman (see: *Zardoz*) is often presumed unintentional but is so ingrained, it's obviously deliberate. The same goes for his commitment to the macabre: the forest of rotted grail knights is grisly enough for a Spanish or Italian zombie picture (they look like the Templars from the *Blind Dead* movies). Bresson-style battles get bloody as knights struggle to lift heavy swords and rattle heavier armour. The finale is unforgettably gruesome, as Arthur impales himself on Mordred's lance to get close enough to finish the bastard off with a defiled sacred sword.

Despite its relative lack of star power, *Excalibur* was a commercial success — a hit in cinemas which became a mainstay of video rental

Alamy

**Clockwise from main:** Bloody mayhem amid the magic; Nigel Terry grasping the famed sword as Arthur; Nicol Williamson casts a spell as Merlin; Helen Mirren as Morgana.

and cable TV (sometimes in spoilsport cuts trimmed of nudity and gore). It minted stars: Patrick Stewart and Liam Neeson sit at the Round Table in early roles as Leodegrance and Gawain; later, they would become fixtures in large-scale fantasy adventure. Boorman also spotted Gabriel Byrne, Ciarán Hinds and Brid Brennan early.

*Excalibur* has lush Irish locations to go with its local talent — revisiting the sites of *Zardoz* — and glistens with a sexiness excluded from *Star Wars*. Mirren, Lunghi, Clay and Addie wear astonishing costume creations (by Bob Ringwood, who made the Tim Burton bat-and-cat-suits), though only Mirren has character material worth chewing over. The film's magic is inherent rather than showy, with a lack of Spielbergian fireworks — but runs deep. *Excalibur* is now a film of stature, likely to be referenced, parodied, imitated and homaged. Zack Snyder, who frequently speaks of his love for the movie, recreated the Arthur/Mordred death with Superman and Doomsday in *Batman V Superman: Dawn Of Justice* — though we might notice similar mutual stakings in a couple of 1970s Hammer films, *Dracula A.D. 1972* and *The Legend Of The 7 Golden Vampires*. 1980s cinema audiences shrugged at *Legend*, *Ladyhawke* and *Willow* but studios kept rolling the polyhedral dice. After Peter Jackson made the *Lord Of The Rings* films and HBO put George R.R. Martin's *Game Of Thrones* on television, *Excalibur* seemed less a modern retelling of one of the great bodies of world mythic literature than a forerunner of the look, feel, sound and dramatic tone of a 21st-century film and TV genre. Perhaps Merlin saith it best: "The future has taken root in the present."

***EXCALIBUR* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

# PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

## 1 MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING

OUT **OCTOBER 13 / DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL**

If this is to be the last *Mission* (at least for now), then it's a fine, if unexpected, note on which to end. Although slower, more serious and sombre than any previous instalment in the franchise, it's hard to deny the power of that last hour, as Tom Cruise and Christopher McQuarrie go underwater and high in the sky to ensure Ethan Hunt goes out with a bang. Choose to accept.

## 2 M3GAN 2.0

OUT **SEPTEMBER 29 / DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL**

Shamefully shunned at the box office this summer, Gerard Johnstone's killer robot doll (pictured below) returned with an upgrade, and a complete change of genre to action-comedy. That may have turned off diehard horror fans, but they missed a wild ride, one that — due to its thematic similarities — means it would be a great double-bill with *The Final Reckoning*.

## 3 CLUE

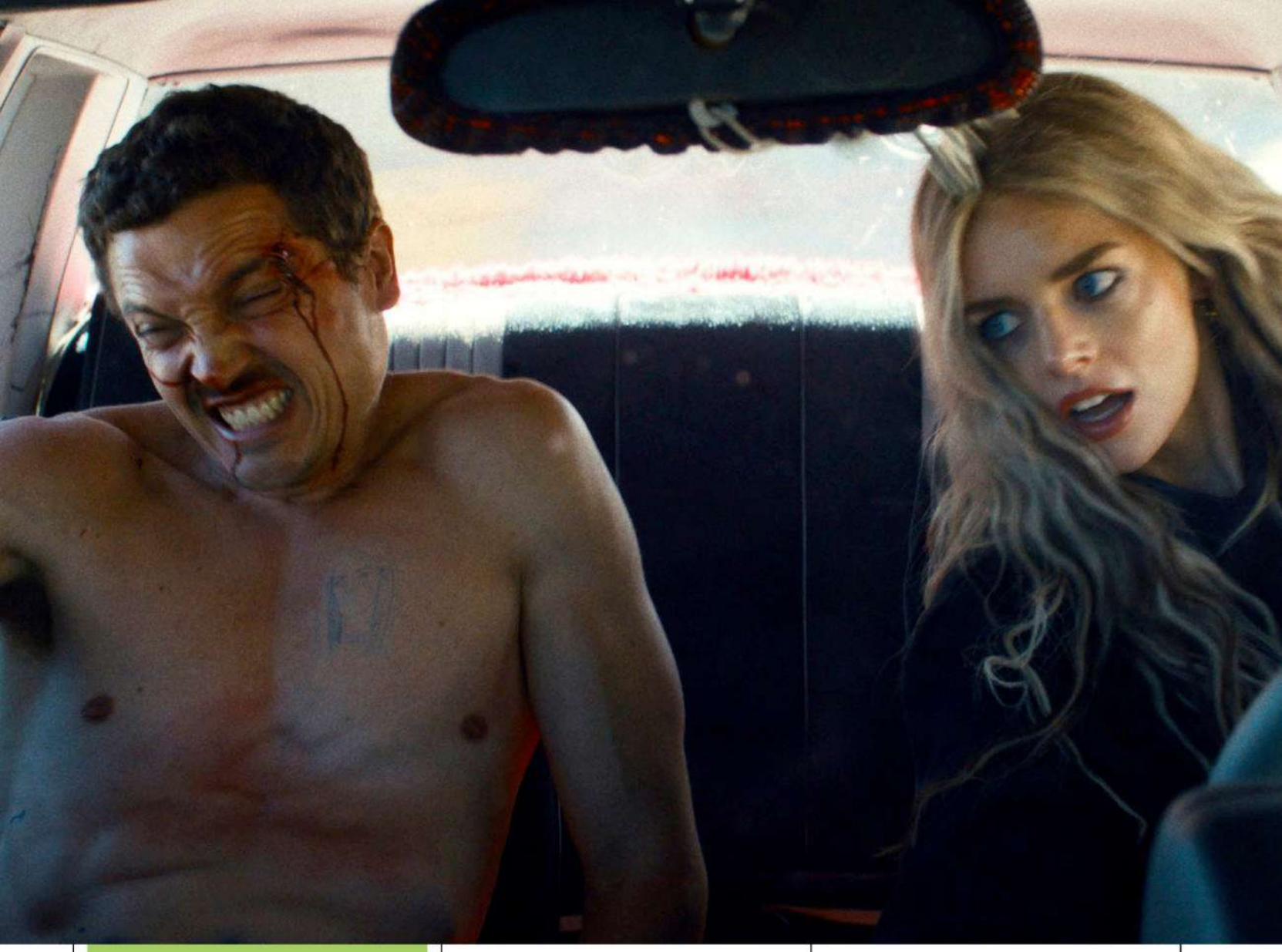
OUT **OCTOBER 20 / 4K BR**

Jonathan Lynn's frantic farce (with screenplay by John Landis, based on the board game Cluedo) is perhaps best known for its audacious three-endings climax. But the whole thing is enormous fun, with a (literally) game cast of cracking comedic actors giving it their all. Whowunnit? It was Tim Curry, in the whole damn house, with the great big whacking slice of ham.

## 4 JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES

OUT **OCTOBER 6 / BR**

Is Chantal Akerman's depiction of three days in the life of a Belgian woman the greatest movie of all time (as declared recently by, well, another publication), or a three-hour slice-of-life snoozefest? This remastered BFI re-release may help you make your own mind up on that. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle.



SPOILER SPECIAL

# Eenie Meanie

**ITS WRITER-DIRECTOR ON THE GETAWAY THRILLER THAT CAME OUT OF NOWHERE**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IF YOU'RE A parent with young kids, and you fire up Disney+ one day looking for something new and fun to keep the bairns busy, here's a piece of advice: do not throw on *Eenie Meanie*, thinking it's going to be some cutesy children's movie. Instead, you will get an R-rated rollercoaster that follows Samara Weaving's ace getaway driver, Edie Meaney, as she tries desperately to pull off a heist. There will be swearing. There will be murders. There will be Karl Glusman's bottom. *The Lion King* it isn't. "I never thought about that," laughs Shawn Simmons, who both wrote and made his directorial debut with the film. "That title could be sneakily a dangerous thing on the platform." Those who do watch *Eenie Meanie* knowing what it is, and who it's aimed at, though, will discover a dark and delicious thriller, with a frankly astonishing performance from Weaving at its core. Here, Simmons talks us through some of its key moments...

## MEET EDIE

*Eenie Meanie* begins by introducing us to its hero, Edie, at a pivotal moment in her life. Fourteen years old (and played by Elle Graham), and already a talented driver, she picks up her ripped-to-the-tits parents (Steve Zahn and Chelsey Crisp) from a local bar in the middle of the night. But when a cop car pulls them over, a conflicted Edie is told by Mark to "punch it". We never see what happens next, although we learn about it later: Edie crashes, killing her mother and crippling her father, and is condemned to a life of foster homes. It's the first thing Simmons wrote for the movie, "not knowing what this movie was going to be. And I let the characters write it from there".

## EX MARKS THE SPOT

Jumping ahead 14 years, Weaving's Edie is beginning to put her life together after leaving behind a criminal past. One problem: she's pregnant by her long-term lover, John (Glusman), with whom she recently broke up. Against her better judgement, Edie blows off an exam to go to John's apartment to break the news. And there the film kicks into gear, as she happens upon John being given an absolute kicking by two thugs. Edie intervenes, and the duo go on the run. Oh, and John's naked. "That came out of nowhere in my brain," laughs Simmons. "It felt fucking funny and exciting to me that he's running through the projects nude." It keyed into one of his storytelling maxims: "Make the audience ask questions. 'Why is this? Why?' That's all I want people doing. The movie is a constant reveal of mystery."

## DADDY ISSUES

Long story short (watch the film for the full menu of twists and turns): John is in serious debt to Nico (Andy Garcia), a gangster who has a soft spot for Edie (and, in fact, gave her her 'Eenie Meanie' nickname). To work it off, the pair find themselves at the centre of a heist, with the plan to steal $3 million from a Toledo casino. But when they realise they need another getaway driver at the 11th hour, Edie tries to recruit her father, Mark, now wheelchair-bound, reformed, and living with his new wife. But their first (and, Simmons confirms, last) meeting in 14 years does not end well. "This wasn't a movie about, 'Hey, people change, and they can be something different, and save the day,'" says Simmons. "I kind of hate that movie. It's not true to what we're doing here."

## BET ON EDIE

Throughout the movie, we're told how good Edie is behind the wheel. Eventually, we get to see her show off her skills as she has to make her escape from the casino with the loot. "Practical was the only way in a movie like this," says Simmons, who was only slightly hampered by the fact that Weaving had to learn to drive before filming began, because the driving was actually done by a stunt man perched on top of the car. Including an eye-catching stunt where Edie reverses a car through a casino. An actual working casino. "People were gambling on the other side of the casino, and we're ripping a car through it in a way I never dreamed," laughs Simmons. "We only broke one pillar or something." What are the odds on that?

## OUT YOU MUST GO

"I got this," says a seemingly transformed, responsible John to Edie, shortly after they return to Cleveland with the loot, having somehow engineered a miracle escape and outgunned getaway driver Perm (Marshawn Lynch), who has tried to sabotage their heist. Sadly, John almost immediately shows that he does not, in fact, got this, by killing two of Nico's men, his erstwhile colleagues. His rationale: he and Edie can steal the $3 million and make a new life for themselves. "A guy like John, it's a completely rational decision — 'If I tell Edie this, she's going to try and talk me out of it,'" says Simmons. He would have been wise to do so. Because, in a shock move, Edie then shoots John. For Simmons, she's not just doing it to save herself from a life of looking over her shoulder, but is putting John out of his misery. "She has to make the ultimate decision," says Simmons. "It's almost romantic. There's a certain tenderness to that. And, hopefully, the audience wonders whether it was a contract between them, and he knew it was the thing to do."

## EIGHTY-SIX BY NICO

"I like the idea that people go into this movie thinking it's a blast," says Simmons, "and then it's not." The breakneck, frenetic energy of the first half of the movie, where one damn thing leads to another, has deliberately dissipated by this point. Edie, fresh from having killed the love of her life and the father of her unborn baby, goes to see Nico. During their quiet conversation, Nico is forced to acknowledge the constant treachery of his best friend and right-hand man, George (Mike O'Malley), who double-crossed Edie and John in Toledo. "We're mirroring Nico and George against John and Edie," says Simmons. "I was very excited about the idea of having the hero and the villain grieving at the same time in a room. And suddenly she's stronger than he is. That excited me a lot." Perhaps they'll meet again down the line. 'Minie Mo', anyone?

***EENIE MEANIE*** **IS ON DISNEY+ NOW**

# Time Capsule

# Kyle MacLachlan

## SCALING THE MANY PEAKS OF THE ACTOR'S CAREER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"IT'S STILL KIND of shocking to me that David's not with us," says Kyle MacLachlan. He's talking about his good friend, and close collaborator, David Lynch, who has just shown up in one of the photos *Empire* has chosen for MacLachlan's Time Capsule. Lynch's impact on MacLachlan's career is immense — the actor's first two movies, *Dune* and *Blue Velvet*, were for Lynch, and then there was *Twin Peaks*, in which MacLachlan played the eccentric hero, Agent Dale Cooper. "I have so many memories, and to me he's just very present and alive still, in my mind and in my memories." With the BFI mounting a major Lynch retrospective season in London in January, and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* joining the Criterion Collection's UK canon, it's the perfect time to take MacLachlan down memory lane...

### DAMN FINE PHOTO
**TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME** (1992)

"This is a great photo. We've lost everybody. Miguel Ferrer, who was a dear, dear friend, played Albert. And David Bowie was such a lovely human being. He really went for it. I thought he did a beautiful job. Look how we're just kids here. So crazy. This was in the offices, where we shot at the studio. They just said, 'Let's get this picture.' We just grabbed it quickly. This is before we had a roving set photographer, so it's kind of rare that we're all together."

### CHEEKY BOY
**TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN, EPISODE 2** (2017)

"Ah, Mr C. I remember this, and just feeling so uncomfortable, because this poor fellow, I had to really, really massage his face. And David was getting a big kick out of it. I was trying not to laugh, he was trying not to laugh. I recognised, of course, that it was such an act of dominance from Mr C, or Evil Coop. It was another one of those moments with David — he would suggest something as he watched the scene develop. I was like, 'You want me to do what?' He would be very, very specific. 'Get in there and really rub the cheeks!'"

### YABBA DABBA DOO
**THE FLINTSTONES** (1994)

"With the lovely Halle Berry! This was so much fun. As you can see, she's holding some kind of strange fake cigarette, I've got a giant plastic martini glass, and the wristwatch is a sundial made with bones. Every day we came to work, there was a new fun prop that we got to play with. And the wardrobe was so great. Basically, this is all suede. It was so comfortable, unless we were outside: then it was a bit warm. This is one of the few roles that I actually auditioned for. I was cast from my audition. I was very surprised!"

Alamy, Getty Images

## SHOW OFF
### SHOWGIRLS (1995)

(***Empire:*** *"Sorry if this brings back bad memories."*)
"Well, good and bad. The filming, actually, was really fun. We were mostly in South Lake Tahoe, filming at a casino. I remember watching the actual, choreographed performance, and thinking, 'This looks like a Vegas show!' It was really professional; they brought in a lot of dancers from Los Angeles. And when I wasn't working, it just so happened to be one of the best winters there for skiing. So I had a really great time filming it, then went to the first screening, and I sat there, and to put it mildly, I was dumbfounded. I don't know what happened, but something happened."

## LISTEN WITH LYNCH
### BLUE VELVET (1986)

"We were shooting in a hardware store. This is one of those rare moments when David would actually listen to me asking questions. When I first started, particularly on *Dune*, I pestered him with questions. I would ask all sorts of things about the script and what was going on, out of insecurity more than anything else. This must be early in the day, because he's listening to me! At least, it looks like it. David has a knife. He was either whittling something, because he used to like to do that, or it might have been for sharpening the pencil. Our relationship grew and developed during *Dune*, and *Blue Velvet* really cemented it. It was just magic."

## STING IN THE TALE
### DUNE (1984)

"So, there's [me], Paul Atreides, the ruler of the universe, Sting bearing down on me with a cool knife, and Patrick Stewart in the middle. Over Patrick's right shoulder is Arturo [García Rubio], who was the second AD on the show. He ended up having quite a large part. I remember we were both complaining because Sting's outfit was really heavy, and it was really very difficult to move in, and for me to raise my hand over my head was very difficult. It was like wearing a rubber band. Sting did not want to die. He was like, 'Is there any way that I could not be killed?' And David was like, 'No, I'm sorry, it's going to have to happen.'"

## FLAME ON
### THE HIDDEN (1987)

"So, this was my third film. I had worked only with David Lynch, and suddenly I'm now working with Jack Sholder as a director. I'm holding a flamethrower here, and they actually gave me a real flamethrower to use. And this was the first time I'd been squibbed up. I'm running through a ballroom in a hotel in downtown LA, and I'm shot by all these police officers. It was really fun to shoot this. I remember being so excited. I get squibbed and I get a flamethrower. This is why I'm an actor: I get to do this cool stuff."

## FLOWN THE COOP
### TWIN PEAKS: SEASON 2, EPISODE 22 (1991)

"It was funny, because it was a piece of glass, not a mirror, and Frank Silva, who played BOB, was on the other side. We were just so conscious of trying to mirror each other, of course. Many attempts, much laughter. I think the blood in the sink was applied by David. He was very specific about how he wanted that to look. I remember just chanting, 'HOW'S ANNIE?' and getting kind of giddy as I was saying it. But beyond that, thinking, 'This has to be a really strong reason for ABC to pick us up for another season. We got this in the bag!' And that was not what happened. That was the end of the line. I was excited about what I was going to be able to play as an actor, about the potential of taking Cooper [somewhere else], now he's inhabited. I ultimately did get to do that, but it took 25 years."

***TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME*** IS OUT ON OCTOBER 13 ON CRITERION COLLECTION BLU-RAY. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE BFI'S DAVID LYNCH SEASON, GO TO WWW.BFI.ORG.UK

# Second verse

## STARS/WRITERS TOM BASDEN AND TIM KEY ON EXPANDING THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IF YOU'RE A filmmaker trying to get a feature off the ground, it's not unusual for a short film to be made as a proof of concept. Wes Anderson expanded *Bottle Rocket* into a feature. Damien Chazelle almost got whiplash from turning *Whiplash* into a film mere months after his short. Neill Blomkamp turned *Alive In Joburg* into *District 9*, Sam Raimi essentially remade *Within The Woods* as *The Evil Dead*, and so on and so forth.

In that regard, then, *The Ballad Of Wallis Island* isn't unusual at all, in that it's an adaptation of a short film called *The One And Only Herb McGwyer Plays Wallis Island*. It has the same basic story — an eccentric millionaire called Charles Heath (Tim Key) hires a conceited folk-music star called Herb McGwyer (Tom Basden) to travel to his remote island home in order to play a private gig. It has the same basic structure. It has the same creative team — James Griffiths directs, and Basden and Key pull double duty as screenwriters.

What is unusual, though, is the time it took to prove that concept. Eighteen years, give or take, passed between *The One And Only...* and its reconstitution into *The Ballad Of Wallis Island*. "Since we made the short, we would meet up and talk about it," says Basden. "We had a lot of quite noodly thoughts about it, but didn't really get a lot done on paper."

It was worth the wait. While the former is perfectly fine, and was BAFTA-nominated at the time, the latter is one of the best films of the year, and one of the best British films of the decade. Like its progenitor, it's often very funny, it's got cracking tunes (all written by Basden), and a warm heart at its centre. But there's a crucial difference between this and the short: like all good ballads, it's deeply moving.

Part of that, admit Key and Basden when *Empire* catches up with them in early September, is a by-product of that time gap. When they shot the short back in 2006 (it wasn't released until 2007), they were mere pups. Now, both in their forties, you can feel the weight of time on their faces, on their shoulders, in their every action. "If we had cracked what the feature film would be," admits Key, "and managed to fund it and make it within three years after the short, that's the one thing we wouldn't have got. The short is set entirely in the now, but the film is cast way back into this sort of nostalgia."

But most of that emotional resonance comes from a key decision the two made when, after years of talking about it, they finally sat down to expand the short into a feature. In short, a two-hander became a three-hander, with the addition of Carey Mulligan as Nell Mortimer, Herb's former partner (romantic and creative), who is also invited to the island by Charles. The shift in dynamic, and Nell's effect on both Herb and Charles, is palpable. "It was about 2019 when we hit on the idea of there being a Nell character, and of Charles slightly playing God," explains Basden. Key nods in agreement. "She brings everything together, really. It turns it into a bigger story. She allows Herb to see Charles through her eyes, and everything kind of warms up."

But perhaps the most crucial addition to the film is a character we never meet. In the short, Charles was a single man. In the film, he's a widower, still deeply in love with his wife Marie, who passed away five years ago. "When I think about the short film now, we didn't have any of that backstory for Herb or Charles," says Basden. "But when you look at Charles, even in the short there's a kind of sadness to him, a loneliness and a constant need to talk that suggests someone who's trying to keep a lid on all of these quite profound emotions."

Thus, Marie was created. Interestingly, the reveal that Charles has planned the McGwyer-Mortimer gig for the fifth anniversary of Marie's death came very late in the day, and was actually captured during additional photography. "The

**Above:** Musician Herb (Tom Basden) is brought ashore by Charles (Tim Key) to the remote island. **Top right, top to bottom:** Charles gives Herb a sign; The island's local shopkeeper, Amanda (Sian Clifford). **Left, top to bottom:** Herb and former partner Nell (Carey Mulligan) on song; Charles reaches out.

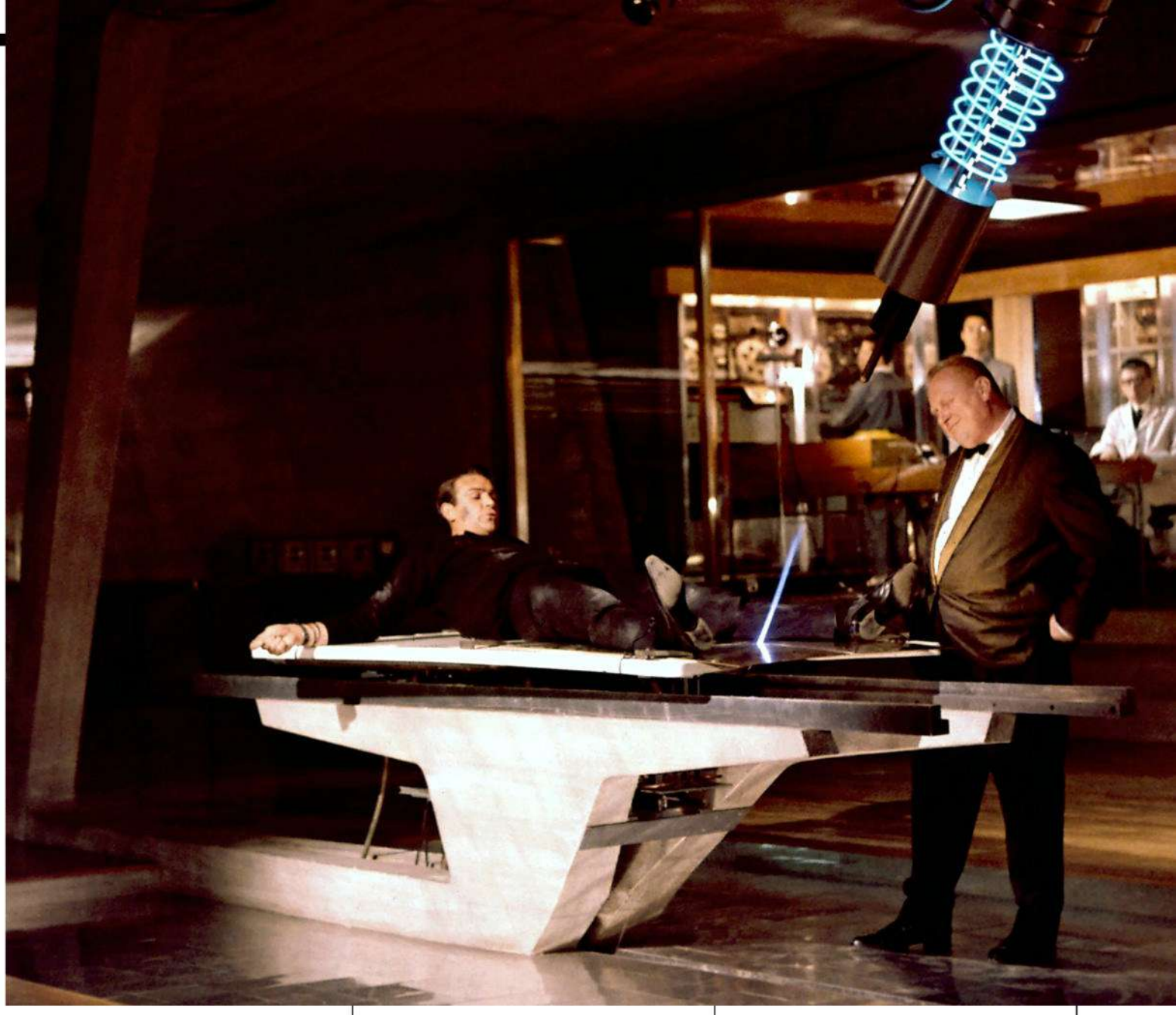
thing with Marie's presence in the film was much more to do with how big she would be in the film," says Key. "Our instinct is always to not lay it on too thick. We managed to get a good balance of how big a presence she would be in the film."

Despite the addition of new characters, the focus remains on the boundlessly enthusiastic Charles and the recalcitrant Herb. In fact, some of the early scenes are essentially remakes of the equivalent scenes from the short, right down to the same lines of dialogue. "We really tried not to do it totally verbatim," laughs Key, "but it's difficult not to. We're steeped in that short. We used to show it when we did live gigs." One scene, in which Charles reveals to Herb that he became a multi-millionaire by winning the National Lottery twice, stood out to Key. "I'd be interested to get it scientifically looked at, actually," he says. "I say, 'So, I played it again, and won it again.' I'm sure I did it exactly the same." Basden laughs, and adds, "We should just swap the audio, see if anyone notices."

Both films start and end the same way, with Herb arriving and leaving the island. But the journey he takes in-between in the film is vastly different. "What the ending means has changed so much," says Basden. "In the short, the character doesn't really change. In the feature, it was very important that he did. It's part of this stripping back of Herb, peeling away his layers of pretence. He's just completely exposed by the end of it."

A case in point: as the credits roll, we're treated to a brand new Basden song, 'The Ballad Of Wallis Island', in which it is revealed that Herb has gone back to his real name of Chris Pinner, and embraced his true musical self again. It's this song that is emblematic to Key of the film's heart-warming success, that saw it stay in UK cinemas for months. "Having watched quite a lot of screenings now, a lot of people stay and listen to that song," says Key. "It's very emotional, and quite different from the short. As a way for people to leave the film and leave the cinema, it's a slightly more grown-up ending."

***THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND*** **IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL**



STORY OF THE SHOT

# Goldfinger

**"DO YOU EXPECT ME TO TALK?"**

WORDS **IAN FREER**

## THE ORIGIN

*Goldfinger*'s laser scene might be the most famous scene in the 007 pantheon. Having been captured while infiltrating bad guy Auric Goldfinger's (Gert Fröbe) operation in Switzerland, James Bond (Sean Connery) is strapped to a table while an industrial laser moves inexorably towards the thing he treasures most: his nuts. Cue one of the most famous dialogue exchanges in movie history — "Do you expect me to talk?" "No, Mr Bond; I expect you to die!"

In Ian Fleming's 1959 novel, Bond is threatened by a silent-movie-esque circular saw that screenwriter Richard Maibaum believed was out-dated. "Maibaum changed it to a laser," says James Chapman, author of *Licence To Thrill: A Cultural History Of James Bond*. "The first lasers were developed not long before the film so there's this idea of modernity, of high-tech, repositioning this rather melodramatic device by putting an entirely new spin on it."

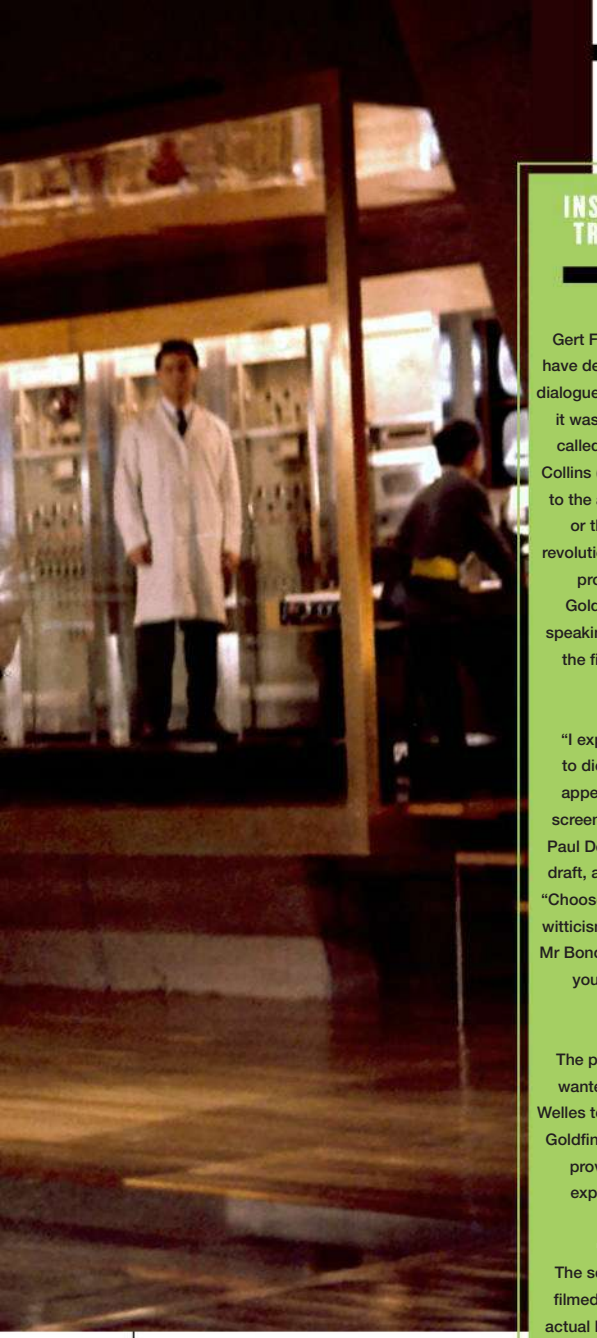
For Charlie Higson, author of the *Young Bond* series and adult 007 novel *On His Majesty's Secret Service* (as well as star and co-creator of *The Fast Show*), the scene is baked into its author's obsessions. "Fleming was famously a sadomasochist and into spanking and stuff like that," he tells *Empire*. "A core idea of what Bond is about is Bond being captured and tortured. The scene has got an element of sexual threat to it, because the laser is coming up through his legs — certainly the men in the audience are wincing and crossing their legs." May Bond, as Roger Moore might quip, forever hold his piece.

## THE SHOOT

Lensed at Pinewood Studios during March 1964, the laser scene was the first one shot involving Bond and Goldfinger. Connery was lying on sheets of brass covered with a gold finish, with an acetylene gun (i.e. a blow torch) mounted on an electrically operated unit moving towards the actor's crown jewels. In charge of guiding the gun was special-effects technician Bert Luxford: "As I got nearer and nearer to his crotch, Sean was sweating a bit," he has said. "I was about three inches from his crotch when I stopped."

The actor's panic played perfectly into the scene. "It's not the first time in the films that

Alamy, Getty Images, Photofest



## INSTANT TRIVIA

**1**

Gert Fröbe may have delivered the dialogue on set, but it was an actor called Michael Collins (no relation to the astronaut, or the Irish revolutionary) who provided Goldfinger's speaking voice in the final edit.

**2**

"I expect you to die" didn't appear in the screenplay until Paul Dehn's third draft, along with, "Choose your next witticism carefully, Mr Bond; it may be your last."

**3**

The producers wanted Orson Welles to play Auric Goldfinger but he proved too expensive.

**4**

The scene was filmed using an actual laser (seen left) but the blue line looked weak under studio lights, so a red optical effect was added later.

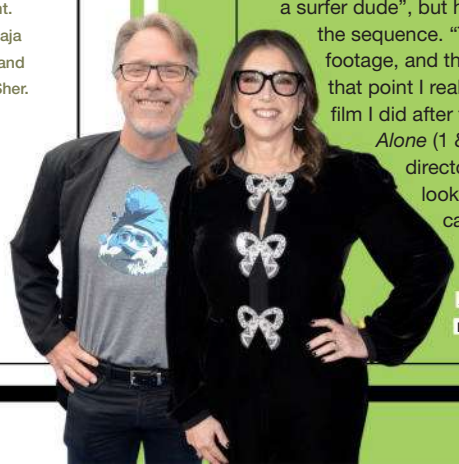
Bond is in jeopardy, but it might be the first time he is utterly helpless," says Chapman. "He's manacled down. He's not got a handy gadget in his pocket to get him out of this situation, so he has to use his own wits and nerve to persuade Goldfinger not to kill him."

## THE LEGACY

The sequence — perfectly directed by Guy Hamilton — has long been a source of inspiration. Riffs include *The Simpsons* episode 'You Only Move Twice' (starring James Bont), and scenes in *Red Dwarf* and *Robot Chicken*. The Bond series itself paid homage in the Easter-egg-filled *Die Another Day* when a restrained Jinx (Halle Berry) is attacked by moving lasers. Summing up the scene's lasting power, Higson suggests " so much of it is in the mind. If you stripped out John Barry's intense music score and the sound, it's just a light moving steadily towards Sean Connery." Now *that's* cinema.

***GOLDFINGER* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

**Main:** Bond (Sean Connery) baulks at Goldfinger's take on laser treatment. **Right:** Raja Gosnell and Stacey Sher.



SPECIAL THANKS TO...

# STACEY SHER & RAJA GOSNELL

### CHRIS COLUMBUS ON A DUO WHO HELPED HIM ON HIS MAIDEN VOYAGE

NOT ALL FILMMAKERS use the Special Thanks section to credit their mates, or their mentors, or their mums. Take Chris Columbus. He tends to tip his hat to organisations and institutions. The Residents Of Lincoln Ave on *Home Alone*. The National Portrait Gallery on *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone*. On his latest, *The Thursday Murder Club*, A.L.E. Photocopiers get a nod. Photocopiers!

It hasn't always been thus. In the credits of Columbus' directorial debut, *Adventures In Babysitting*, there can be found the names of actual human beings: as well as his NYU film professor Haig Manoogian, he thanks Stacey Sher, the producer of *Get Shorty* and *Out Of Sight*, and Raja Gosnell, the director of *Never Been Kissed* and *Scooby-Doo*. Although that wasn't who they were back in 1987. "Stacey Sher was Lynda Obst's assistant," explains Columbus, referring to *Adventures*' producer, "and was very instrumental in helping us throughout the entire course of production."

Gosnell's story is a little more complex. "I had two editors on *Adventures In Babysitting*," says Columbus. But because I shot thousands of feet in the blues-bar sequence, which is my favourite sequence in the film, for some reason the two of them couldn't do it. They said, 'There's too much film, we need to bring in someone to cut that scene.'" Enter Gosnell, who had worked on the likes of *Good Morning, Vietnam*. Columbus describes him as "kind of a surfer dude", but he and his assistant Tim came in and cut the sequence. "They spent a week going through all my footage, and their first cut was exhilarating," he says. "At that point I realised that I would want Raja to edit every film I did after that." Sure enough, Gosnell edited *Home Alone* (1 & 2) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* before pulling up a director's chair. But it's an inspirational example: look at the boost a thanks from Chris Columbus can have on your career. Over to you, A.L.E. Photocopiers. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING* IS AVAILABLE NOW ON DISNEY+**

# The Ranking

# Scarlett Johansson movies

## TEAM *EMPIRE* RANKS THE ALL-TIME BOX-OFFICE CHAMPION

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

### OUR CRITICS

**CHRIS HEWITT**
Regrettably, he doesn't love *Lucy*.

**HELEN O'HARA**
She's got red in her ledger.

**BETH WEBB**
The ScarJo version of her name is BeWe.

**JOHN NUGENT**
*Ghost World* is his favourite ScarJo comic-book movie.

**Chris:** Recently, it was reported that Scarlett Johansson has usurped Samuel L. Jackson as the highest-grossing movie star of all time. So now seems like a good time to Rank her very interesting career.

**Beth:** I love her. It's a real rarity, I think, to have a career as a woman over this many decades, just because of the way that the movie business is.

**Helen:** I think because she has a deeper voice, she read older than her years. Maybe it meant she had a lot more choice than some actors coming out of their teens, and she was able to move up to adult roles a little bit sooner. And good for her, using her looks in an almost Marilyn Monroe kind of way, to push in all the directions she could, and not just play the femme fatale.

**Chris:** It was fascinating watching her develop in the MCU. She was brought in as a sex bomb in *Iron Man 2*. Tony Stark sees her and says, "I want one," like a cartoon wolf. And by the end of her tenure, Natasha's a fully rounded character who's as far removed from that as it's possible to get.

**John:** I first saw her in *Home Alone 3*, the last great *Home Alone* film. She makes interesting choices, and I'm interested to see, now she's out of the MCU, where those choices go. She's just done *Jurassic World*.

**Chris:** I think you can divide her career into four portions: indie stuff, blockbusters, the MCU, and first, the child/teen star portion, where she came to prominence with things like *Ghost World*. That was sold on Thora Birch, but I remember watching it and going, "Who's this?"

**John:** She's fantastic in that. That's her breakthrough film, in terms of showing that she can be quite caustic and funny and a bit weird, and using her voice in a powerful way.

**Beth:** It's like the two-wolves thing. Scarlett Johansson is the person you want to be at that age, but you're actually Thora Birch.

**Chris:** It's wild that *Lost In Translation* is just two years later. She was 19 when that movie comes out. So she moved very quickly from playing second fiddle to Thora Birch, to all of a sudden holding her own with Bill Murray.

**John:** *Lost In Translation* is as close to a masterpiece as you're going to get in her filmography. It's amazing. It's got this simmering atmosphere, and I don't think I've seen a performance from her since that feels so understated and sad.

**Beth:** I really like what Sofia Coppola does. She captures these wayward girls who are lost. She really wears her heart on her sleeve in this.

**Helen:** It shows how quickly Johansson realised the power of that movie-star thing of not doing very much. That could sound snippy, but she really doesn't have a lot to do. It's about underplaying and understatement and being in an alien place.

**Chris:** I don't love *Lost In Translation*, and haven't warmed to it over the years. But I don't think that the Bill Murray whisper at the end holds the power that it does without her reaction. Is it the performance of her career?

**Helen:** For me, *Marriage Story* is up there.

**Chris:** I'm sorry, I just gotta go and punch the wall in anger.

**Helen:** I think Adam Driver was talked about more at the time, but it doesn't work without her. In a lesser film, it could have been the bitch role, but she manages to keep it from being that and to make sure her character has a coherent point of view.

**Beth:** It's devastating. It's been much memed on the internet, but that moment where they're having a confrontation in that bare, sad room, and they can't even find the words to describe the sadness they're feeling... It's just such an intense showcase.

**Chris:** In 2020 she gets nominated for Best Actress for that, having also just starred in *Avengers: Endgame*, which was briefly the biggest film of all time, and also gets nominated for Best Supporting Actress for *Jojo Rabbit*.

**Helen:** What a year for her. And she's completely blameless for *Jojo Rabbit*.

**Chris:** Hey, I like that movie! And the big emotional kicker of that comes from her. It rips the heart out of your chest.

**Beth:** It's a charming performance from her.

**Helen:** It's great when she gets to do comedy. Which is why I so appreciate things like *Hail Caesar!*. She's capable, but

hasn't always had the chance to show it.
**Chris:** Would that it were so simple. She's become part of Wes Anderson's repertory company as well.
**John:** She's great in *Asteroid City*. It's such a strange, meta film, but you can still feel humanity in her performance.
**Helen:** It's also the biggest of her Wes Anderson roles.
**Chris:** All these big A-list directors have flocked to her. It's not a great role in Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*, but it's such a great film.
**Helen:** She almost worked with him too early. She would have been brilliant in the world of *Tenet*. I don't think she's a great fit in *The Prestige*, although it's a film I love.
**Chris:** Another auteur she's worked with is Spike Jonze, in *Her*. If you're going to get a voice performance, then get Scarlett Johansson, that's what I say.
**John:** I love that film so much. She was not the original voice. It was actually Samantha Morton, and in the editing they recast. You would never know it, because it feels like incredible chemistry between her and Joaquin Phoenix. And what a prescient film it is.
**Beth:** The journey her character goes on, it's a real range. It's her evolving and growing apart from him and being curious.
**Chris:** Talking of journeys takes us to *Under The Skin*, possibly the oddest film in her filmography.
**Helen:** I didn't want to revisit it, but I'm glad I did. It's a fascinating performance. It's weaponising and twisting and subverting her sex-bomb status, and it's playing some really weird notes. She's astonishing in it. It doesn't work unless she commits 100 per cent.
**Beth:** It's such a pivot from her. It's her at her most raw and vulnerable. You just don't see A-list actors making a film like this.
**Helen:** You don't see anyone making a film like this.
**Beth:** And it works. She's entirely authentic and strangely sympathetic as well, which was quite hard given what she does.
**Chris:** I like to imagine people stumbling upon *Under The Skin* and going, "Oh, Scarlett Johansson, let's check this out," and then five minutes later being like, "What the fuck is going on?"
**John:** It's quite something, isn't it? I watched it when it came out and I've not been brave enough to go back, because I haven't ever been so profoundly disturbed by a film. It just got under my skin.
**Chris:** *Home Alone 3* was the last time.
**John:** Both films really examine the human condition.
**Chris:** There's also the blockbuster side to her career. But it's dominated by one thing above all else, and that is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the primary driver for her record-breaking status.
**Helen:** She had that really silly introduction in *Iron Man 2*, and even by Avengers was being better used. She has some of the best lines in that film. And you see her, in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, forming this genuine friendship with Steve Rogers.
**Chris:** Natasha Romanoff was really interesting, in that she could plug and play with pretty much everybody. You could put her in a scene with Tony Stark, or Bruce Banner, or Steve Rogers, and she would be compatible with all of them.
**Helen:** It's what makes her sacrifice in *Endgame* really heartbreaking. She is the only one who has these relationships with everybody.
**Beth:** I'm not a massive MCU nerd, but I really felt it when her character died. To see the impact of Natasha's loss was one of the biggest emotional beats of *Endgame*.
**John:** She was the human heart of the Avengers. *Endgame* is the only Marvel film on my list here.
**Chris:** I had to restrict myself to just seven. But seriously, *Captain America: Civil War* is just terrific, for example.
**John:** But in *Endgame* you see her struggling with her duty and sense of sacrifice and a sense of failure.
**Chris:** Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

**AGREE? DISAGREE?**
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## THE TOP TEN

1.
**UNDER THE SKIN** (2013)
2.
**LOST IN TRANSLATION** (2003)
3.
**AVENGERS: ENDGAME** (2019)
4.

**MARRIAGE STORY** (2019)
5.

**GHOST WORLD** (2001)
6.
**HER** (2013)
7.
**CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER** (2014)
8.

**HAIL, CAESAR!** (2016)
9.
**CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR** (2016)
10.
**THE PRESTIGE** (2006)

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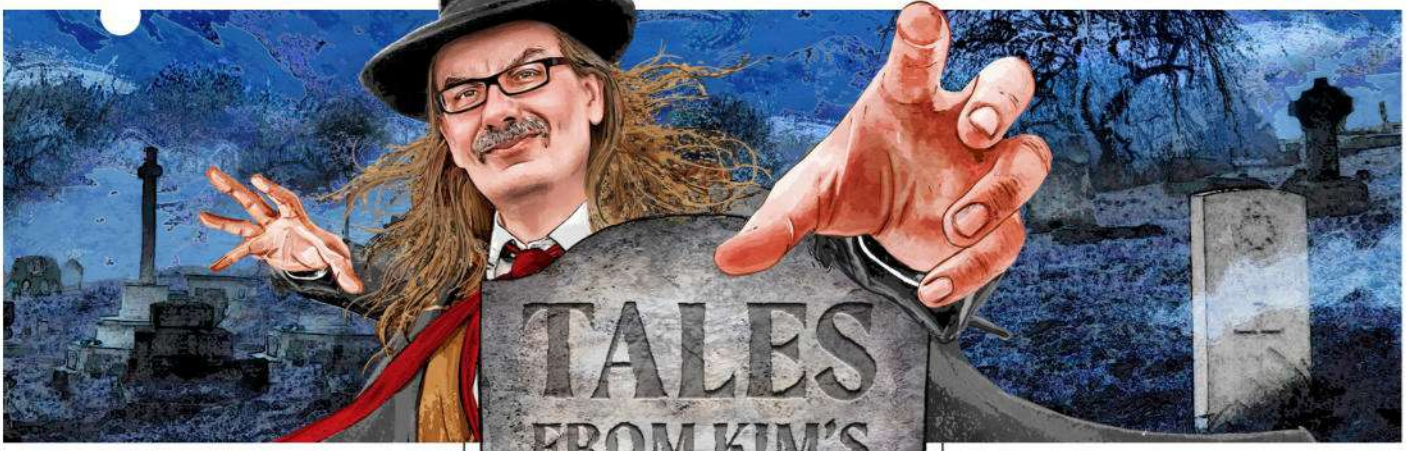


# TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

**LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA**

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

## WHEN EVIL LURKS

IN 2023, I SERVED on the jury at the Sitges Festival in Spain, which is to fantasy and horror what Cannes is to regular movies. That involved two weeks of screenings, from early in the morning — I saw *Poor Things* at 7am — to very late at night... and a downside to that regimen is fear fatigue. Even the most extreme and peculiar films have a hard time getting past the eyeballs and registering on the brain. We saw many excellent films which are only now percolating to UK distribution, but awarded the top prize to Argentine writer-director Demián Rugna's *Cuando Acecha La Maldad* — aka *When Evil Lurks*. It's now out on a special edition, bells-and-whistles Blu-ray that should be a cornerstone of your contemporary-horror collection. Even after days of top-notch terror, *When Evil Lurks* shook up your jaded jurors. Imagine how it plays to civilians.

Rugna comes up with a unique exorcism/possession variant in a dynamic, shocking, affecting drama. Here, epidemic outbreaks of possession have been going on so long that churches have fallen into disuse. Coping with the crisis requires adherence to *Gremlins*-like rules ("Never use firearms") and obscure scientific/mystic procedures which might not actually work (they involve an alchemical-looking device which has to be assembled and used by a skilled operator). A demon initially possesses one person, who transforms into a bloated hulk. Killing the victim sets the demon free to wreak general havoc, while leaving it alone merely slows down the infection as malice spreads throughout a community, especially targeting the very young. Pedro (Ezequiel Rodríguez), an angry divorced dad, lives with his mellower brother Jimmy (Demián Salomón) and works for a landowner in the boondocks. When the brothers learn that there's a 'rotten' in one of the tenant farms, their boss orders them to drag the huge, slug-like thing into a pickup truck and drive him hundreds of kilometres off to be dumped so he's someone else's problem... which, of course, leads to more disasters. At one point, the family dog does something shocking which equals the moving bag in *Audition*. You have been warned.

In a field marked by rote tied-to-a-bed-and-sicking-up business, it's full of original ideas. The possessee being heavy and slimy and a major hassle to shift makes for suspenseful, comic-horrific sequences. When a demon possesses an autistic mind, it gets tangled in knots (as do its host's fingers) along the atypical neural pathways — which leads to a profound chill as we realise Pedro's son is not actually him, though his family are grateful he faces fewer challenges than usual. A cult of demon-influenced kids try to be helpful in misdirecting ways, with contradictory stories and advice designed to split up the unpossessed so they can be pounced on and killed. And a demon goat shoves its head against a shotgun, daring a farmer to kill it so more havoc can be wreaked.

Check out Rugna's 'haunting' movie *Aterrados* (*Terrified*) too — it's '*Insidious* but what if a whole street were cursed?'

**Top to bottom:** *When Evil Lurks*: Demián Salomón has a bad trip; You might need some cream for that...

Alamy

## CRYPT KEEPERS

KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

### BIOSPHERE
**(DIGITAL)**

Ex-President of the US Billy (Mark Duplass, of the *Creep* franchise) — or is that President of the Ex-US? — and longtime friend/advisor Ray (Sterling K. Brown) survive a Billy-caused catastrophe in a cramped bunker. 'Life finds a way', and a weird situation gets weirder. Not entirely successful but interesting.

### FRÉWAKA
**(DIGITAL)**

Irish-speaking nurse Shoo (Clare Monnelly) is home help for recluse Peig (Bríd Ní Neachtain), who believes fairies disguised as social services are out to punish her. Writer-director Aislinn Clarke (*The Devil's Doorway*) covers folk-horror ground with conviction, again wedding primal fears to past shames.

### IT FEEDS
**(DIGITAL)**

Dreamwalking therapist Ashley Greene doesn't want to treat a girl who has a hungry demon stuck to her, but is dragged into the case by her own incipiently psychic daughter (Ellie O'Brien). Chad Archibald's well-acted, visually inventive horror drama does fresh things with familiar nightmares.

### OMNI LOOP
**(DIGITAL)**

Mary-Louise Parker has a week to live. Mystery pills afford her a chance to do over her last days, *Groundhog Day*-style, to infinity. Should she spend quality time with loved ones or work with student Ayo Edebiri to science her way to a happy ending? Low-key, emotionally resonant science-fiction.

### SAINT CLARE
**(DIGITAL)**

Catholic schoolgirl Clare (Bella Thorne — fully committed) is led by mystic visions to stalk serial killers vigilante-style, while starring in a gender-flipped high-school production of *Deathtrap*. An unusual spooky mystery with an interesting cast (Rebecca DeMornay, Ryan Phillippe).

# The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY ISSUE, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

## MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

**1** What is the name of the Russian submarine that plays such a pivotal role in both *Dead Reckoning* and *The Final Reckoning*?

**2** This British actor and writer gives good faint at the end of the first *Mission: Impossible*, back in 1996. Name him.

**3** In which *Mission* film does Ethan actually say the words, "Mission accomplished!"? (Of course, it turns out that it isn't…)

**4** What is the highest-grossing *Mission* at the global box office, taking $824 million?

**5** Which character is missing from this list of *Mission* villains (and from which movie?): Jim Phelps, Sean Ambrose, Owen Davian, XX, Solomon Lane, August Walker, Gabriel.

**6** In *Rogue Nation*, Ethan encounters Rebecca Ferguson's Ilsa Faust for the first time. What is their 'meet cute'?

**7** Because filming overran on 2000's *M:I-II*, Dougray Scott couldn't play which iconic superhero (changing cinema history)?

**8** "Sir, Hunt is the living manifestation of destiny," is a line spoken in which *Mission* movie (and by which actor?)?

**9** Which *Mission* movie ends with Ethan being offered "the cinema of the Caribbean"?

**10** Who says the line, "Well, it's not mission difficult, Mr Hunt. It's mission impossible"? And in which film?

**11** Which *Mission* sees Simon Pegg's Benji Dunn use one of those magic IMF masks to pass himself off as CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer?

**12** Jon Voight's Jim Phelps reveals to Ethan that he is *not* dead at a key moment in *Mission: Impossible*. Where does this take place?

**13** The oath that is sworn by all IMF agents upon joining the organisation is detailed, for the first time, in *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning*. It begins, "We live and die in the shadows..." How does it end?

**14** What is the name of the real-life Dubai skyscraper that Ethan Hunt finds himself scaling in *Ghost Protocol*?

**15** Which *Mission* begins with the sequence where Tom Cruise clung to the side of an A400 aircraft as it took off?

**16** Five directors have made the eight *Mission* movies. Name them, in release order.

**17** If *The Final Reckoning* is, indeed, to be the franchise's final reckoning, what is the last line of the series, and who says it?

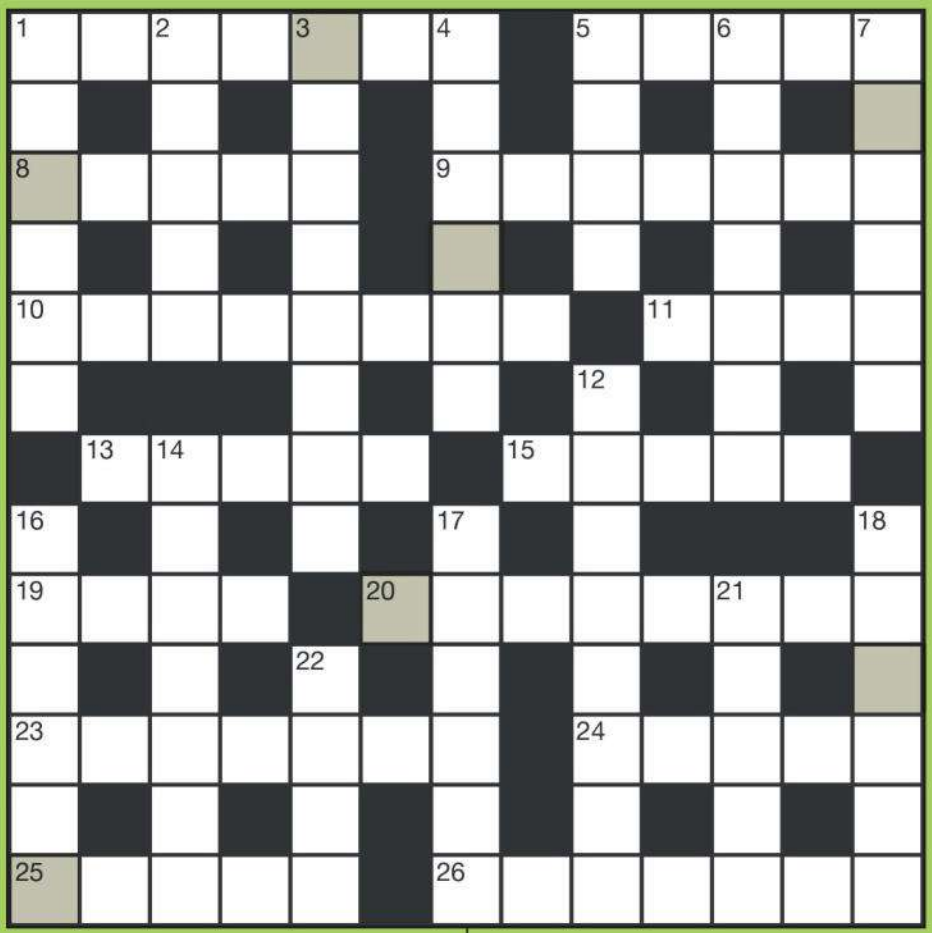
**18** Lalo Schifrin wrote the *Mission: Impossible* theme tune, of course, for the 1960s TV show. Which band reimagined it as 'Take A Look Around' for *Mission: Impossible II*?

**19** Which *Mission* takes place at locations including Vatican City and Shanghai?

**20** Her real name is Alanna Mitsopolis. But to us, she's perhaps better known as...?

**ANSWERS 1** The Sevastopol **2** David Schneider, as Train Engineer **3** *Ghost Protocol* **4** *Fallout* **5** Kurt Hendricks (Michael Nyqvist), in *Ghost Protocol* **6** She arrives in Ethan's cell, seemingly to interrogate him... **7** Wolverine in 2000's *X-Men*. The role went to Hugh Jackman **8** Alec Baldwin's Alan Hunley, in *Rogue Nation* **9** *Mission: Impossible* **10** Anthony Hopkins' uncredited Mission Commander Swanbeck in *Mission: Impossible II* **11** *Fallout* **12** Liverpool Street station **13** "... For those we hold close, and those we never meet" **14** The Burj Khalifa **15** *Rogue Nation* **16** Brian De Palma, John Woo, J.J. Abrams, Brad Bird, Christopher McQuarrie **17** "Good luck, Ethan", said by Ving Rhames, Luther Stickell **18** Limp Bizkit **19** *Mission: Impossible III* **20** The White Widow (Vanessa Kirby)

## CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

**1** Ron, the first big-screen Hellboy (7)
**5** See **21 Down**
**8/17 Down** His Mercury Productions unit made movies for RKO (5,6)
**9** Disney animation based on the fairy tale 'Rapunzel' (7)
**10** Pamela Anderson was the last (8)
**11/1 Down** The body of Darth Vader! (4,6)
**13/15 Across** He was the *Boyhood* boy's dad (5,5)
**15** See **13 Across**
**19** Anne Hathaway had one of you (4)
**20** Could be Connelly or Lawrence (8)
**23** *Midnight* — (Michael Shannon film) (7)
**24** Ken, whose recent films include *Sorry We Missed You* and *The Old Oak* (5)
**25** Nicholas, from **14 Down** and this year's *Superman* (5)
**26** Tarkovsky film set in the Zone (7)

### DOWN

**1** See **11 Across**
**2** Rene, who was in *Tin Cup* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (5)
**3** *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*'s Michelle (8)
**4** *Forces Of* — (Sandra Bullock movie) (6)
**5** John, who's played Peacemaker and a US President (4)
**6** *The Firm*'s director Sydney (7)
**7** Riseborough from *Mandy*, *To Leslie* (6)
**12** In which a loathsome Tom Cruise character instructs men to "seduce and destroy" (8)
**14** It offers Fiennes and Taylor-Joy (3,4)
**16** Judd, who's been Jeff Goldblum's on-screen dad and sort of Spielberg's uncle (6)
**17** See **8 Across**
**18** Anne or Kate Bishop or Robin Hood (6)
**21/5 Across** He made *It Happened One Night* (5,5)
**22** Horror-movie icon Ingrid (4)

## COMPETITION

# WIN!

## HAMMER FILMS CLASSICS ON 4K

AUTUMN IS HERE, the perfect excuse to get cosy with some gems from Hammer Films, as the legacy collection continues to grow on limited-edition 4K. First up,1953 thriller *Blood Orange*, following a PI investigating a jewel robbery that turns deadly. *Empire*'s own Kim Newman shares commentary duties with *Brit Noir* author Barry Forshaw. Next is spooky nail-biter *The Man In Black* (1949) — with a pre-*Carry On* Sid James as, remarkably, an occult enthusiast and yoga expert. Finally — firmly in the Hammer wheelhouse — the studio's legendary gothic horror, *The Curse Of Frankenstein* (1957), in a stunning six-disc set. To enter to win all three, see below.

**ALL LIMITED COLLECTOR'S EDITION 4K ULTRA HD & BLU-RAYS ARE AVAILABLE TO BUY NOW AT WWW.HAMMERFILMS.COM**

**COMPETITION ENDS** OCTOBER 20

**HOW TO ENTER** Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on October 20. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

**OCTOBER ANSWERS ACROSS: 1** Peter Sellers **8** Glenn **9** *Sabrina* **10** Phoebe **11** *Twins* **13** Renard **15** Truman **18** Jared **20** *Ending* **23** Campion **24** Feige **25** Robert De Niro. **DOWN: 1** Page **2** *The Thin* **3** Renee **4** Easter **5** Lobster **6** Raimi **7** *Passing* **12** *Project* **14** *Red Line* **16** Mancini **17** Jeunet **19** *Rambo* **21** Dafoe **22** Bejo. **ANAGRAM:** EDGAR WRIGHT

**TERMS AND CONDITIONS:** One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before October 21 or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Two winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winners' personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winners' details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

## THE SUNKEN PLACE

# Get Out

CHOSEN BY **ADAM B. STEIN**
(DIRECTOR)

**ADAM B. STEIN: "The hypnosis teacup scene from *Get Out*. It's such a simple scene, just two people sitting in chairs, but I remember being completely terrified watching that in a theatre for the first time. The sound design, the way that spoon [scrapes] around the edge of the teacup, was very hypnotic, and terrifying. I can't hear that sound without thinking of that scene."**

**INT. MISSY'S OFFICE — NIGHT**

*Missy (Catherine Keener) has invited Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) into her office, ostensibly to use hypnotism to help him quit smoking. They're just talking (or so he thinks), but Missy has started rhythmically stirring her cup of tea. The scraping begins to affect Chris in ways he can't comprehend.*

**MISSY:** What about your mother?

**CHRIS:** What about her? Wait, are we—?

**MISSY:** Where were you when she died?

*Chris stares at Missy. The stirring sound continues.*

**CHRIS:** I don't wanna think about that.

*Missy smiles. Continues to stir. Chris relents.*

**CHRIS:** Home. Watching TV.

**MISSY:** Can you hear the TV? What do you hear?

**CHRIS:** Rain.

**MISSY:** Rain. It was raining. Hmm. You hear the rain? (*Chris shifts uncomfortably. Then hears rain*) You hear it? Find it. Tell me when you've found it.

*The rain gets louder. Chris suddenly has a vision of his younger self, sitting in front of a television. The room is dark, and dancing with rain shadows.*

**MISSY:** C'mere. Chris, look at me.

*Chris looks at Missy. He laughs, but it's a bitter one.*

**CHRIS:** Found it.

**MISSY:** (*Still stirring*) Where was your mom?

**CHRIS:** She, uh... she was coming home. She wasn't home.

**MISSY:** From work? (*Chris murmurs in agreement*) Mm. And what do you do?

**CHRIS:** Nothing.

**MISSY:** Nothing?

**CHRIS:** I just sat there.

**MISSY:** You didn't call anyone?

**CHRIS:** No.

**MISSY:** Why not?

**CHRIS:** (*Laughing awkwardly*) I don't know. I just thought that if I did, it'd make it real.

*We see that young Chris is scratching his bedposts with his fingers. Our Chris is doing the same with the leather armchair in Missy's office. Tears are streaming down his face.*

**MISSY:** You were so scared. You think it was your fault? (*Chris doesn't reply*) How do you feel now?

**CHRIS:** I can't move.

**MISSY:** (*Shaking her head*) You can't move.

**CHRIS:** Why can't I move?

**MISSY:** You're paralysed. Just like that day when you did nothing. You did nothing. Now... sink into the floor.

**CHRIS:** Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait—

**MISSY:** Sink.

*Off Chris' startled face, we see his hands suddenly splay and freeze. We see young Chris in his room. The camera sinks into the bed behind him, Chris plunging into an endless black void. He looks up and sees Missy recede into the distance.*

*Back in her office, Chris is frozen, tears coursing down his cheeks. Missy creeps towards him, checking him. Chris tries to blink, but can't.*

*In the void, he looks up at Missy, far away. Almost as if she's on a TV.*

**MISSY:** Now you're in the Sunken Place.

# GET READY TO CAST YOUR VOTE

## #TVCHOICEAWARDS

Voting for the **2026 TV Choice Awards** opens soon! Get ready to vote for your favourite stars and shows and you could be in with a chance of winning a pair of tickets to this star-studded event.

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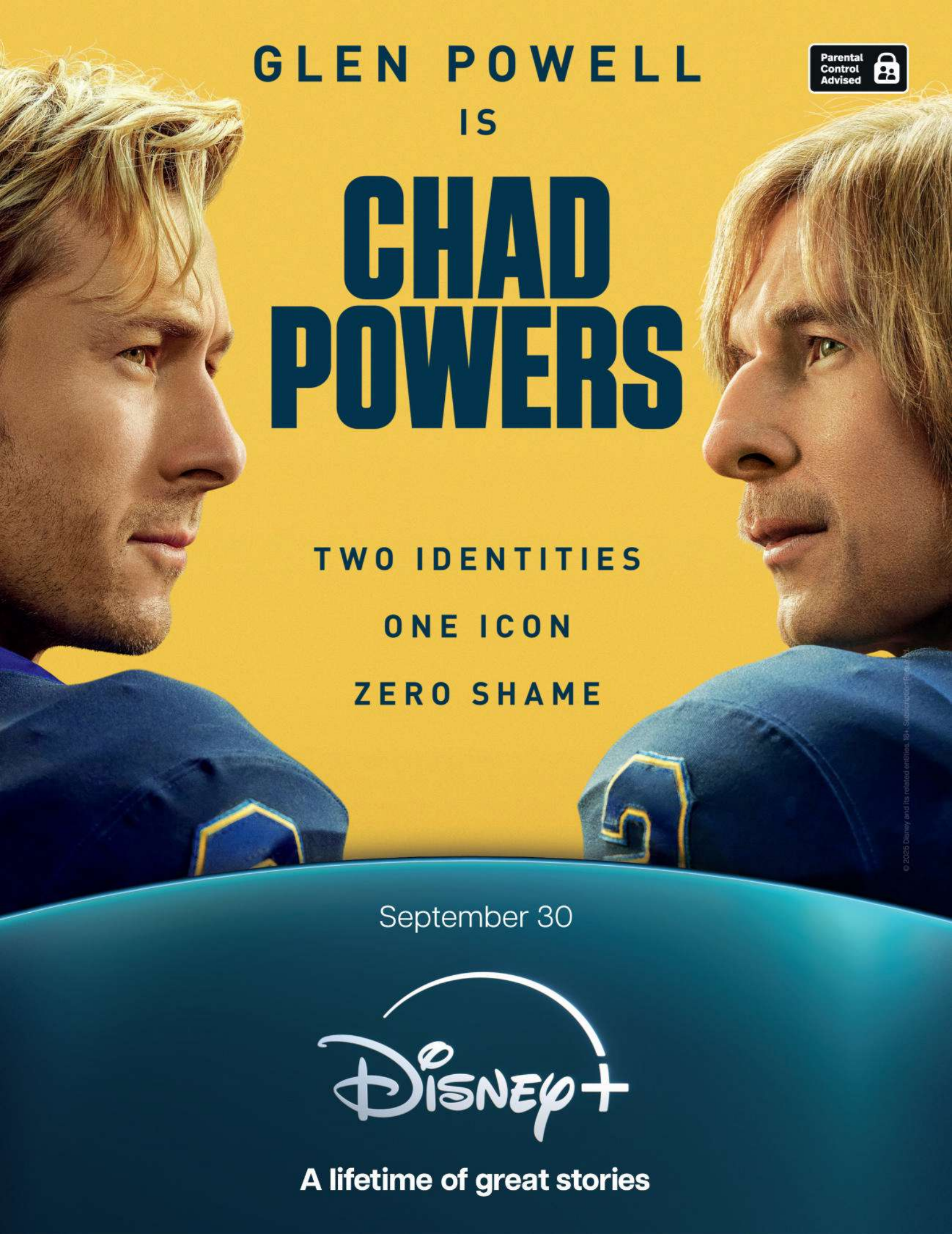
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